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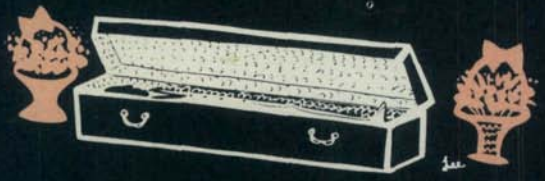

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **STANLEY ELLIN**

TITLE: ***The Faith of Aaron Menefee***

TYPE: Crime-Suspense Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Auto mechanic Aaron Menefee fought hard against sin and temptation. And then he was "called" to the camp of righteousness, and from the day he first met the Healer, Aaron knew it had all been* meant . . . *A brilliant new story by a New Master.*

WHEN THE BIG BLACK CAR CAME limping into the gas station I could tell that it was hurting inside, the way I hurt whenever old hot-spot jabbed into my belly. There was a chauffeur driving, and three people sitting in back: a discontented-looking girl and a weasel-like fellow, and in between them this man with the red face and the shock of gray hair. They all got out to look while I poked into the motor.

"It's the carburetor," I told them. "Seems like it was just worked on, but whoever did it made a mess of it."

The red-faced man gave the chauffeur a look like a thunder-cloud coming up over old Turtleback Mountain.

"How long will it take to fix?" he said to me. "And I mean a real good job on it. I've got to be in Cincinnati by early evening, and there's still forty miles to go. I don't aim to break down on the way again."

"I'll fix it while you wait," I said. "As for the kind of job it'll be, you ask anyone around here, and they'll tell you that if it's a machine made by man and run by gas, Aaron Menefee'll fix it right."

He looked around at the empty road. "Don't seem to be many around here to ask," he said, and

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then he laughed so that you had to like him on the spot. "All right, Brother Menefee," he said, "It's my feeling that most folks are honest and willing. I'll put my trust in you."

It took a little longer than I figured, but I finally had the motor tuned up and idling, sweet as a kitten purring. The red-faced man looked happy about that. When I told him the price he looked even happier. "Brother Menefee," he said, "you've just boosted my high opinion of the human race one more notch."

And then it happened. And it happened in a way that I know was *meant*. Just as he was handing me the money, old hot-spot caught me a lick so fierce that I had to double over and hold my breath until the feeling eased up.

"What is it?" the man said. "What's wrong?"

I felt ashamed at making such a fuss in front of people. "Nothing," I said. "Leastways, nothing that can be helped. Doc Buckles says it's an ulcer, and I'm on milk, potatoes, and prayer to heal it, but it looks like it's here to stay."

He was interested. Not the way most people are just glassy-eyed polite, but deep-down concerned. He looked at me from head to foot, and then he made a fist of one hand and beat it into the other a couple of times. Then he walked right around me as if he were measuring me for a suit of clothes, and the others just stood and watched us.

"Brother Menefee," he finally said, "you don't know who I am, do you?"

"I guess I don't."

"Well, brother, my name is Otis Jones. Healer Jones they call me. Did you ever hear of that name?"

"I guess I never did."

"You mean, you never followed my Faith Meetings on radio or TV? But I'm coast to boast, brother. Two hundred radio stations and eighty TV stations worth of coast to coast each and every Wednesday night of the year!"

"Maybe so," I said, "but I don't bear with radio and TV. From what I heard there's a load of sinful stuff on 'em. Stuff about women and drinking and killing and such. A man's got to work hard enough fighting down the old Adam in him without looking on such temptations."

"There's no sin and temptation on my programs, brother. All they show is the meetings where I carry on the work the Almighty empowered me to do. What work, you ask? Healing, brother—healing! In this right arm here is the power to lift the sick from their beds, take the crutches from the maimed so that they can walk again, and restore a man to all the good fortune he can ask for on this everlasting earth! Do you have faith, brother?"

"I have faith," I said. "I've mortified the flesh, I've prayed until my

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knees were skinned raw, and I've still got faith to spare."

"Good. Because if you've got faith my power can take hold of you and cure you. If not, you're just fooling yourself. Here, take hold of my hand, and see if you don't feel the power just pouring into you. See if it don't happen."

I took his hand, and, sure as I was standing there, old hot-spot started to settle down as if it felt a couple of Doc Buckles's pills working on it. That was when I knew it had all been *meant*. The way he picked that old highway to travel, the car breaking down, and my being right on the spot with old hot-spot set to act up worse than usual.

He must have known it was meant, too. He said, "You've got faith, brother. Tonight, you come to my Faith Meeting in Cincinnati, and I'll turn all my power on you, and heal you from this day henceforth. My daughter here'll give you a card with the address, and I'll expect to see you there, cleansed and ready. And pass the word along, brother. All are welcome, faithful and scoffers alike."

I took the seven o'clock bus to Cincinnati—sixty cents worth of riding each way—and got there just before meeting time. It was like nothing I had ever seen before—bigger than the circus and a lot more gratifying to the soul. A monstrous tent, white as snow, was pitched in the middle of the grounds with people swarming in from every direction. Ten big trailer trucks which, I figured, were used to carry the equipment for the meeting, stood in a line off to one side. Two other trucks were rigged up with power plants, and one of them had a spotlight on it which sent a beam straight up into the sky like a fiery sword.

I bought a hymn book for a dime on the way into the tent, and when I was sitting there in the middle of maybe ten thousand people, I looked into it and found a card which said to fill out your name and address and infirmity and turn it in to an usher, so you could be called for healing right at the meeting. I did that, and then I joined in with the rest, and we sang some hymns from the book, with the Healer's daughter leading us in a nice sweet soprano from the platform up front. They were all good hymns, too. The kind to twist old Satan's arm behind his back and bring him howling to his knees.

It was after this that lights came on so bright in the tent that you had to blink your eyes against them. That was for TV, sure enough. You could see the two big cameras, one aimed at the platform and one at us in the seats, with men waiting at them. And as soon as those lights came on, the Healer walked out on the platform, moving slow and easy, his hands out in greeting, a king among men, but a good, plain man himself for all that, you could tell.

He didn't waste any time; he ex-

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horted us right from the beginning, and so hard that first he opened his necktie, then he pulled off his coat, and then you could see the honest sweat dripping off his face and coming out in big splotches on his shirt. It is good to see a man sweat like that; you know he means what he says, and he is working hard to get it across.

Mostly it was about how faith had led him to his power, and how faith would lead us to our cure, and when he came to the part where he told how right in a little back room of the Rocky Heights First National Bank where he was clerking for miserable pay, and sick and ailing at that, he had dropped to his knees and felt the power seize him, it was enough to make a lot of the folks around me shout and groan and carry on in their joy for him.

Then came the healing. The little weasel-like fellow who the Healer said to us was Charles M. Fish, his manager, stood on the platform and read off the names on the cards, while one by one we marched down to take our turn. When it came my turn, and I had to walk down that aisle with everyone craning to see, and that big glass eye of the TV camera staring at me, I felt my knees would buckle under me before I made it.

But I did make it, and there I stood at the foot of the platform with the Healer on his knees just above me, a microphone in his hand.

"Brother," he said into it, and when I heard his voice booming out in the tent behind me I almost jumped, "what is your affliction?"

He held the microphone at me, and I said, "Ulcers."

"Did you hear that?" the Healer yelled at the crowd. "This big, good-looking young man in the prime of his life is being eaten alive by a sickness that defies man's medicine, cursed by a fiery torment licking at his vitals day and night—and yet he has faith to stand before me and seek deliverance! Do you think he can be healed?"

"Yes!" everyone yelled back at him. "He can be healed!"

The Healer mopped the sweat from his face and looked down at me. "Do *you* think you can be healed, brother?"

I could feel the power crackling out of him like electricity now. I couldn't wait for it to take hold of me and settle things once and for all.

"I can be healed," I said.

"Then bend your head, brother. Bend your head, and make sure your faith is just as strong as my power. Because if it is, you're going to walk out of here a new man!"

He didn't wait for me to bend my head. He shoved it down with his big hand, and called out, "Heal this man! Be merciful and heal him," and then suddenly hit me on the back of my neck with his fist, so that the power in him ran right into me, clear down to the roots. There wasn't a flicker in old hot-

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spot. It was as if nothing had been wrong there in my whole life.

"I'm healed!" I said, hardly daring to believe it. "I'm healed!"

He shoved the mircophone at me. "Say it again, brother. Cry it aloud in your jubilation!"

I grabbed my belly to make sure. I didn't feel a twinge. "It's gone!" I said. "It's a miracle!"

I didn't care what happened then. I jumped up and down. I waved at everyone in the crowd and shouted right along with them when they shouted hallelujah for me. Even with that TV camera aimed at me all the time I didn't care. I was never happier in my life.

When I came back to town to pack my bag and say goodbye, most folks just gave me a pat and a handshake and let it go at that. But Doc Buckles was terribly soured on me. Doc was short and fat, a good man in some ways, always willing to lend a hand where it was called for, and I had the kind of weakness for him that he had for strong drink and godless talk. He walked up and down his office, waving his arms the way he does, and talking to me on and on. Even though he knew my ears were closed against him he didn't stop. Once Doc gets started it takes a lot to stop him.

"What kind of life is that?" he said. "Being an auto mechanic for a traveling tent show? Working day and night for less money than Ab Nolan pays you at the gas station, making a holy show of yourself at those meetings, living with a bunch of swindling strangers! You'll find out what it's like, boy."

"Maybe," I said, "but I've been called. And I'm following the call."

"Called!" He threw up his hands. "You were called to get rid of lustful thoughts by rolling around naked in the snow one night, so that I had to pull you through pneumonia. You've been called to bust up Glenn Lyman's rabbit traps every time he sets them, so you've been to jail twice already for that. Every time you're called it means trouble for you, Aaron. Don't you have sense enough to see that? It always means trouble when a man's too good for his own good."

"*My* body was healed," I said, "but there's many another got to be helped now. I'm just adding my mite to the work."

"I don't tell you how to fix my car," Doc said, "so don't you go telling me about healing. The way you're acting you're being just as crazy as your old Dad was. From the time you quit sucking your thumb he filled you up with so much of his hellfire, and talking in strange tongues, and fear of the devil that he clean addled your wits. For all I know, anybody smells sulphur and brimstone as much as you do is bound to get an ulcer from it."

It scared me to hear him talk like that, but I know it was no use trying to argue back. I just don't have the gift of speech, and Doc, especially

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when he's got a load of Old Reliable in him, has more than his fair share.

"I've been called," I said. "If I pass this way again I'll drop in and say hello."

And that's how we left it.

Most of what Doc had said was wicked nonsense, of course, but after a few months I found out that he was right about one thing: there could be plenty of swindling strangers even in the camp of righteousness. I worked with the crew of mechanics tending the Healer's limousine, and the trailers for sleeping in, and the twelve big trucks that carried the Faith Meetings from one town to another. And what I found among those mechanics was enough to curl your hair. Smoking and drinking. Gambling and loose talk. And loose women.

They gave me a rough time of it when they found out that I stood foursquare against the devil, and they made it even rougher when they saw I wouldn't play along and fake expenses for repairs, so that they could pocket the money. Many a time I was tempted to speak right up about it to the Healer, or to Charles M. Fish, or even to Miss Emily Jones, the Healer's daughter, who I got to know pretty well along the way. But I never did, because it seemed wrong to turn in my fellow-man to be fired when maybe he could learn salvation a better way. In the long run, I was glad I hadn't carried tales, because things took care of themselves without that.

What happened was that I finally had a run-in with Everett Kane himself, the foreman of the crew, and the chief cook of the sinful brew that was always boiling around me. He was a nag and a torment, always giving me more jobs than two men could handle and always complaining about them, even though he knew I was the best man he had, better than he was, for that matter. But I kept clear of him, because he was the one who had done that poor job on the carburetor of the Healer's car which led the Healer right to me that day. I figured that if it had all been *meant*, maybe Everett Kane was meant, too, and so I spared him as long as possible.

But one day I caught him signing my name on a requisition for parts I had never asked for, and I put it to him straight out. He was a strong man, vain about his strength, and he chose to let his fists talk for him. He knocked me down, and while I was praying for courage not to answer violence with violence, he knocked me down again. So having turned the other cheek, as you might say, I got up with a clear conscience and went to work on Everett until he was quite messy and had to be carried off for doctoring.

When word of this got to the Healer he called me in and talked to me like an angry father. So I finally explained matters to him, and then everything changed for the bet-

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ter. Everett and the sinners close to him were let out, and I was given his job with power to run things the way they should be run.

That was the beginning of a better time for me. I made the men under me do an honest job and render an honest accounting, and while there was a little grumbling now and then among the backsliders, there was never anything said or done that could mean real trouble. As for myself, I was so grateful for the way things turned out that I made sure to put the biggest part of my pay every week into the hand of the Healer himself as a Faith Offering.

That was how the Healer was rewarded—by Faith Offerings. He would never charge a red cent for using his power; he would just remind folks that all Faith Offerings were welcome and would go to carrying on the good work. And as we moved along, town by town, staying a week at each town, the offerings came pouring in like the waters of Stony Brook when the spring freshets are running.

It was wonderful to see how many people there were who wanted to carry on the good work. Even those stuck at home where they had to follow the meetings on radio or TV joined in. Charles M. Fish once told me that so many offerings came in every day to the post office near Paradise Point where the Healer's Faith Temple was being built, the post office set up a special department there to handle them. There was nothing surprising in that, he said. Many a poor sufferer had been practically brought back from the grave by just touching a hand to the Healer's picture on TV. He carried letters from them in his pocket to show scoffers and jeerers along the way, mostly men from newspapers that had nothing better to do than try and make a mockery of the Healer.

So we moved across the north part of the United States that summer, and then swung down and around through the south that winter. And it was on the southward swing that I knew there was trouble brewing in me because of Miss Emily Jones, the Healer's daughter.

She wasn't what you'd call a real pretty girl like some—she was usually too pale and peaked for that—but she had a nice trim figure, and big dark eyes, and the longest, blackest hair you ever did see. At first I didn't take much notice of her, but then she seemed to be around me a good deal wherever I was, so that I started looking at her, and then I started liking what I saw. That was the trouble, because along with it the devil would pop the most terrible thoughts into my head. It was enough to make me break into a sweat every time I saw them for what they were and had to put up a battle against them.

And I did battle them with all my might. I changed my diet from red meat to greenery; I immersed

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my body in ice-cold water until I was blue from neck to heels; I prayed with my arms held wide until it felt as if knives were sticking into them; but nothing helped. Worst of all was the way Miss Emily liked to take long walks with me at night after the meeting was over, without any idea of what those walks were doing to me. I figured that if I could get up courage to tell her my plight it would settle things, but I just couldn't do it.

I finally did, though, one night in a grove of trees right outside Tulsa, Oklahoma. We walked for a while, and then we sat down on a log to talk in the darkness with the insects chirping away around us and the breeze sighing in the leaves overhead like a lost soul.

I told her everything then, but it didn't work out as I expected. Because when I was done she sat quiet for a long time, and then she said, as if she were thinking it out loud: "The Good Book says *Be fruitful and multiply*. And there's a legal and holy way of doing it, Aaron Menefee."

It took me a second to see what she meant, and when I did it was quite a shocker. "You mean, get married, Miss Emily?"

"I don't see why not. You don't have any objections to matrimony, do you, Aaron?"

I had trouble finding my tongue. "I don't guess I have. But I never thought of it. I didn't figure I was ready for it yet."

She leaned up against me, and when her shoulder rubbed against mine it was as if her father's power was in it. "Don't you ever again call me Miss Emily," she said. "From now on my name is Emily to you, Aaron Menefee. And as for being ready for marriage, you're twenty-five years old and long overdue. If you had as much sense as you had good looks you'd know that's what those thoughts in your head were trying to tell you."

I had never seen the matter like that, and when she spoke those words it was like a stone being lifted off my back. Suddenly it seemed that her shoulder being tight against mine was *meant*, and that my arm going around her waist was the most natural thing in the world. But in the midst of the rejoicing I had a worrisome thought.

"What's the matter, Aaron?" said Miss Emily. "You were doing fine."

"Maybe so," I said, "but what's the Healer going to think about all this? Everything I am right now I owe to him. I can't see going one step further along with this without his knowledge and blessing."

Miss Emily sighed like the night wind in the trees. "I'm my pa's only child, Aaron," she said, "and he's inclined to keep me on a mighty short tether. Don't you think it would be better to slip off somewhere to get married, and tell him afterward?"

"No," I said, "that would be sharper than a serpent's tooth. We can't do it that way."

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"We can't?"

"No," I said. "It's got to be done right, or not at all."

So we went to the Healer then and there, where he was sitting at a table in the back of the big tent along with Charles M. Fish and a couple of others, counting the Offerings and fixing them up to be banked the next day. When everyone else was gone I made a clean breast of everything to the Healer, Miss Emily sitting pale and quiet alongside of me, and I put the matter squarely into his hands.

"It's not for any man to judge himself," I said, "so I leave it up to you as to whether I'm worthy or not. Although I have hopes that you'll see it the way Miss Emily and I do."

He wasn't happy about it, I could tell right away. He sat there a while, working his fingers together, and when he spoke it was with a sad voice.

"Believe me, Brother Menefee," he said, "it isn't a question of being worthy, because you are among the worthiest souls I know. There's more to it than that. Emily here is my only begotten child, and heir to all that has come my way. And I can tell you, Brother Menefee, that a lot of good has been coming my way these last few years."

"Well," said Miss Emily, "if you're saying that Aaron wants to marry me for my money you can take my word for it he doesn't."

"I'm not saying that," the Healer told her. "What I'm trying to say is that I've got a big proposition on my hands here. A mighty big proposition. What with Offerings coming in from the meetings, and the national hook-ups, and the book sales, and pretty soon from the Temple when we get it going, I've got a job on my hands. It's going to take a big man to step into my shoes, and I mean it to be someone who can do it right."

"If you're talking about Charlie Fish," said Miss Emily, "I told you a hundred times over I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man on earth. He makes my skin crawl."

The Healer reached out and patted her hand. "All right," he said, "if not Charlie Fish somebody else with his talents, but maybe more to your taste. When the power was sent down to me it enabled me to reap a mighty harvest, most of it tax-free. Some day you're going to be trustee for all that, Emily, and your wedded mate has to be a fit partner. Worthy as Brother Menefee is I don't see him as the right one. I can't give my blessing to any such unlikely marriage, and, from this day thenceforth, I don't want to hear any more about it from either of you."

My heart sank in me, heavy as a stone going down in deep waters. "I've got faith in you, Healer," I told him, "but it's a hard row you've given me to hoe. No woman has ever made me feel like Miss Emily does, and I don't expect any ever will."

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"It is faith, after all, which can move mountains," said the Healer, "so you trust to it and let Miss Emily be. As long as I'm on earth I reign over her. When I'm gone to glory she'll be free to walk her own path, but that won't be for a long time, Brother Menefee, not with the way my health is and with the power in me. If I were you I'd hoe that long row and keep my eyes peeled for a woman more suitable."

I went away from there feeling as low as I ever had, and in the time that passed nothing could seem to brighten up the days and weeks, although Miss Emily gave it a good try.

"I'll never marry anyone else, Aaron," she said to me. "I'll wait all my life for you, if I have to. Any time you just turn around and hold out your arms I'll be there."

Knowing that only made it hurt the more, because somehow it seemed to pile the whole thing on my back alone. It was like being speared at the end of the devil's pitchfork. As long as you fought to hang on, you couldn't be dumped into the blazing fires below, but you still couldn't ever wriggle off and be free.

It went along that way when we started moving up north with the coming of spring, and it was as bad as ever when we came to Cincinnati right near the old home town. It was that feeling in me which led me to see Doc Buckles, I guess—that and the way I had promised him I'd drop in if I was nearby. Doc couldn't give me the kind of consolation I needed, of course, but he was always full of fizz and ginger, and a good man to brighten you up, if you kept him steered away from foul talk and quarrelsome arguments.

I borrowed the limousine to drive over to Doc's place after meeting was over that night, and the way I had worked on the motor it took no time at all. I wasn't surprised when I pulled up in front of the house to see that the lights were on and the shades pulled down, because Doc kept all hours and didn't like people peeking in on him when he wanted to sit alone with a bottle of Old Reliable. But I was mighty surprised when as soon as I walked into the hallway the door behind me seemed to slam shut by itself, and I felt something hard poking dead center into my back. I never in my life had a gun shoved into my back, so it's strange, when you think of it, how I knew it was a gun right off without even looking.

"Put your hands up," said the man holding it—he had a hard city voice and an ugly way of using it—"and keep walking."

He pushed me along that way into the back office, and shut that door, too, and then I saw I was in the middle of quite a to-do. Doc sat behind his desk looking sick, and a man sat on the edge of the examining table, his legs dangling in a strange, loose sort of way, and his

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face dead-white and twisted with pain.

Doc looked at me as if he couldn't believe it, and then he shook his head. "Aaron," he said, "you sure picked a fine time to come barging in here."

The man on the table pointed at me. "You know him?" he asked Doc. "What's his business here?"

"Nothing," said Doc. "He's a friend of mine, and you let him be. There's no sense making trouble for everybody in town just because you got yourself in a mess. I examined you and I told you the God's honest truth. Your legs are paralyzed, and there's nothing can be done about it. Not by me, nor by anybody else."

The man slammed his hand down on the table. "You talk too much!" he said, and then he looked at me, his eyes blinking and fluttering like a woman's when she's real scared. "Is there any other doctor in this hole?"

I thought that over a spell, and then I said, "No, I don't guess there is."

He slammed the table again. "You're lying! You're covering up for someone!"

"Mister," I told him, "I never yet told a lie to anybody on the face of this blessed earth. And I'm sure not going to risk my everlasting soul by telling you one now."

"All right!" he said. "All right! But who do you go to around here, if you're hurt real bad? You can't tell me everybody depends on this old quack to know what he's doing."

And that was when it suddenly came to me, like the dawn coming up over old Turtleback, that all this was *meant,* too, just as everything had been meant from the day I first met the Healer a long year before. It was being made my bounden duty to snatch Doc back from damnation like a brand from the burning. Once he saw the power at work with his own eyes he'd be saved for sure.

I said, "Doc Buckles is a good man, even if there are a lot of things outside his powers. But I can take you to somebody whose power has never failed. He healed me when Doc couldn't, and every night he heals all those who come to him, no matter what their affliction."

The man on the table looked at me with his mouth open, his eyes half closed. "What kind of story is that?" he said.

"It's the truth," I cried out, "and Doc Buckles here will bear witness to it. Go on and ask him."

Doc leaned across his desk. "Aaron Menefee," he said to me, "I want you to keep out of this, and to keep your healing friend out of this. You don't know who you're talking to here, so I'll tell you. His name's Vern Byers, and he's half crazy and all bad. He killed the cop that put the bullet into him, and then in cold blood he killed the doctor that bungled taking it out, probably because there was a gun at his head when he was doing it. You don't

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want to go playing spooky games with anybody like this, Aaron. You want to keep your mouth shut, and trust you'll see the sunrise tomorrow morning, if you're lucky!"

Vern Byers looked at Doc with eyes like burning coals in his white face. "You old goat," he said. "So you were covering up for somebody all the time!"

"No," I said, "he wasn't. It's just that he doesn't know about the kind of healing that comes from the inside."

"I don't care what kind of healing it is! You bring that guy to me right now!"

"You'll need faith, Brother Byers," I told him. "Do you think you can be healed?"

"I've *got* to be healed! You hear that? I've *got* to be healed! Here," he said, and when he pulled open his coat I could see the nasty-looking gun strapped to his chest. He took out a wallet and shuffled money from it into a big wad. "Here's a thousand dollars cash. That's right. Don't look so dumb about it; just stick it in your pocket. That's for this doctor of yours to come out here, and you can tell him there's another thousand waiting for him when he gets here. Is that a deal?"

"Brother Byers," I said, "the Healer won't take payment for his work. But if this is a Faith Offering it ought to do just fine."

"Call it what you want, but get him here quick. I've got only a couple of hours before they block off every highway out of this state, and I'm not waiting around to see that happen. And here," he said very slowly, his eyes half closed again, "is what you *don't* tell the guy you're sending. This fat quack was right. I killed the one who put my legs wrong like this, and I'll kill any man who takes my money and can't put them right for me. I swear that on my mother's grave."

He was done with me then, and the other man, the one with the gun at my back, pushed me along out of the house and into the car and then got into the seat alongside me. I was a little upset driving that way with a gun pointing at me, but I made good time to the camping grounds anyhow.

The man got out of my side of the car almost on top of me, the gun pushing into my ribs, and when I went into the tent he stood just outside, and I knew that gun was aimed my way every second of the time. The Healer was there at the table with Charles M. Fish and the others, and I walked straight up to him without flickering an eyelash.

"Healer," I said, "there's a man outside who needs your help for a friend of his."

"At this hour?" said the Healer. "It must be mighty serious, Brother Menefee."

"It's all of that, Healer," I told him, the others all gawking at me, "and maybe you can judge of that from the Faith Offering that was made. And," I said, laying the wad

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of bills in his hand, "there's more waiting where that came from."

The Healer looked at the roll, and you could see his eyes lighting up with gratitude for his power. Then he handed the money over to Charles M. Fish. "Brother Fish," he said, "you add this to the tally, and if I don't miss my guess it'll make it just about one of the biggest nights we ever had."

Then he got up from his chair and clapped me right on the shoulder. "And you say there's another such Offering waiting for me, Brother Menefee?"

"There is. But there's sort of a worrisome thing about all this, Healer."

"And what might that be?"

"Well, it might be that this Brother Byers who needs your power is short on faith. I put it to him straight, but the way he spoke up I couldn't figure whether it was yes or no. He's a sinner all the way, Healer, and aimed straight for perdition right now, but whether or not he's working up real faith in his time of trouble I can't say."

The Healer laughed right out loud, so that I felt my face turning beet-red. "You're young and willing, Brother Menefee," he said to me, "but you're real ignorant of these things. Otherwise you'd know that anyone who makes the kind of Faith Offering you just turned over to me is set and ready for my power to enter him. Now, where is this poor unfortunate?"

"Back in town," I said, "the other side of Cincinnati. But his friend's right outside waiting to take us to him."

When we walked out of the tent the man was there, but with his hand in his pocket now, so that I knew the gun was in it and still aiming at me. I wished I could let the Healer know about this, but it seemed a mite risky right then. He and the man got into the front of the car, the Healer behind the wheel, but when I started to get into the back, the Healer held me off with his hand out of the window and slammed the door against me.

"It's kind of you, Brother Menefee," he said, "but I don't figure to need your company along on this mission."

And before anybody could do anything about it he had gunned that big car into a fast start and was heading for the highway.

I stood there with my jaw slack in my head, watching the tail-lights going off down that road, knowing that when they dipped a little they had hit the highway and turned on to it, and seeing them get smaller and smaller until finally they blinked out like little stars in the first light at morning time. And all that while I was praying as hard as I could that Vern Byers's faith would bear up under the coming trial, the way the Healer figured it to.

Not that I'd become a doubter, whatever happened. A man's got no right to question what is *meant*.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MICHAEL GILBERT**

TITLE: ***Snap Shot***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Commander Elfe and Gladwyn Hughes

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The biggest news event of the century—the Prime Minister greeting Paraman while 45 cameramen snapped the shot . . . It looked like an impossible case to solve—until Elfe consulted a mathematician and magician.*

THE REALLY TERRIFYING THING about Lampeter was that he was so ordinary. Neither large nor small, neither intellectual nor brutish. Running decently to fat, as a man may at forty-five. Wearing glasses for reading. The only really surprising thing about him was that he was still a bachelor. You would have thought some woman would have picked him up and popped him in her pocket long ago.

And whatever dragons lived inside his head, whatever dread familiar stood at his elbow whispering commands that could not be disobeyed, whatever worlds he created and whatever worlds he destroyed, they left no mark at all upon his placid face. No single ripple distorted the surface of the dark lake to give warning of the creature that laired in the depths.

How Mr. Robinson and Mr. Smith found out the truth about Lampeter is a mystery. The Robinsons and the Smiths know everything. They live by knowledge. Almost the first time they saw him, Mr. Robinson (who spoke five languages) said to Mr. Smith in one of them, "Here is our man." And Mr. Smith said, "I believe you are right."

"There's going to be an all-time

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record scrum," said "Tabs" Milligan. "Every paper in the land's here."

"Of course there's a scrum," said "Polly" Flinders. He was first photographer for the *Trumpet,* and conscious of the prestige this conferred. "It's not an itsy-bitsy little film star, Tabs. It's Paraman. He *is* news."

"There's old Cummins, looking like a constipated crab. Clever with outdoor work, though. Lot of faces I don't recognize."

"If they don't get a move on it's going to be too dark to take proper photographs," said Polly. "And this is one we don't want to miss, isn't it? Prime Minister of England shaking hands with Paraman. Think of that!"

"It is a sign of the new age," said a small, dark man with a beard.

"It's a bloody miracle," said Polly. "And, boy, here she comes."

The four-engined airliner swung in a majestic curve across the airport, headed into the wind, centered itself on some invisible mark, and came down as firm and straight as if it had been ruled on paper. The pilot picked up the eighty tons of metal and laid it down on the runway as lightly as a feather.

Lines of men in blue began running.

"They've got as many police here as the Coronation and May Day put together," panted Milligan. He was trotting forward with the other newspapermen.

It was superbly organized.

One minute the landing strip was empty. The next minute there was a thin but unbroken blue line round the airliner, fifty yards from it. Unbroken on three sides. Through the fourth, in three well-regimented platoons, each with its roped approach way, came the Deputation of Welcome (morning dress and smiles), the Security Detachment (bowler hats and frowns) and the forty or fifty photographers, in every variety of dress and with no time at all to bother what they looked like.

Landing steps were quickly run out.

But someone had miscalculated. Insufficient frontage had been allowed for the photographers to form a single line. Normally this might not have mattered a great deal, but this was by no means a *normal occasion.*

The line shifted and spread. Two policemen tried to hold back the ends. They might as well have tried to grasp quicksilver. The policemen were evaded, their protests unheeded, as the line elongated, then swept round in a half circle, until the right-hand end rested almost under the shadow of the great airplane.

Down the gangway walked two large men, in brown coats and black hats. They saw the stretching line of photographers, and frowned. But events were moving too fast for them, too.

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For, behind them at that moment, appeared the world-famous figure photographed a hundred thousand times, but until then never seen in the flesh in the Western world. The small beard, the face, almost startlingly brown, the graying hair, the smiling tired eyes. The eyes that had seen everything and forgotten nothing.

The battery of newsreel cameras on the parked vans started to purr in grateful unison. The flashlights of the photographers winked almost simultaneously.

The Prime Minister stepped forward with an impulsive gesture of boyish charm (rehearsed behind locked doors until it had achieved a polished spontaneity), and thrust out his hand. Paraman grasped it, and said something with a broad smile.

The Prime Minister looked round for the interpreter—and in that very moment it happened.

Paraman pulled his hand away and laid it over his heart. A look of wonder came into his eyes. It was as though a question, often asked, had surprisingly been answered.

Then his knees folded under him and he dropped, quietly and without fuss, onto his face on the concrete runway.

"For a moment," said the Prime Minister, "I thought he'd had a heart attack. That would have been bad enough. Then I saw the blood on his hand."

"Yes, sir," said Commander Elfe.

"Even then I couldn't grasp it. Murder!"

"Extraordinary timing," agreed the Commander. His own head was loose on his shoulders at that moment, and none knew it better than he. "We do appreciate the importance of clearing this up quickly."

They were standing in the magnificent Privy Council room in Whitehall. The Prime Minister moved over to the bow window and stared across at the waters of St. James's Park.

He had, in fact, and quite coldbloodedly, considered whether or not he should sack the head of the Special Branch, and had come to the conclusion that for the time being he had better support him.

"I don't want to exaggerate this," he said, "nor, God knows, to minimize it. I don't think it will mean war. Their radio's been white hot, of course, but the world's outgrown the Sarajevo days. On the other hand, if we don't catch the man, and prove that he did it, and why he did it, and clear the whole thing up, why, it'll leave a legacy of distrust for ten years—in just that part of the world where we most need trust."

He came back into the room. The Commander was not quite certain whether the Prime Minister added, "And it will certainly lose us the next election." Spoken or not, the thought was there.

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"I'm sure you'll do your best," the Prime Minister concluded, shaking hands almost formally with Commander Elfe.

"Like a doctor," said the Commander to Superintendent Bliss, "who has just pronounced sentence of death with a hope, a very faint hope, of reprieve. How are you getting on with those bloody photographers?"

"There are exactly forty-five of them," said the Superintendent, "and they are all precisely what they said they were, if you follow me."

"Yes."

"About two-thirds of them were from newspapers. Some old and tried hands. Some new boys. In every case the newspaper concerned says they were absolutely reliable."

"Of course."

"The other third were from private news agencies, large and small. But since there's nothing to stop anyone forming a news agency—it only needs a man, a boy, and a back office near Fleet Street—"

"Quite so," said Elfe. "I suppose we're concentrating on the smaller agencies. Was it a camera gun?"

"I think so. It would be the obvious way, wouldn't it?"

"Have the experts made anything out of the weapon you found on the runway?"

"It's a small air pistol of a very powerful new type. The pressure's too high for ordinary loading methods. It's fired with a compressed air capsule which, incidentally, gives it a higher muzzle velocity than a .38."

"And therefore higher accuracy."

"Yes. A real murder weapon. Two other points about it. It's got no sighting apparatus of any sort, and the exterior of the muzzle is screw-threaded an inch from the end."

"That sounds conclusive to me," said Elfe. "It was specially made to screw into the socket of a camera. And it was calibrated to the camera sights. Right? When the cross wire of the camera view finder was over the victim's heart, the murderer simply pressed the button. All right. You've got all the cameras. It shouldn't be difficult to see which one's been tampered with."

"It shouldn't," agreed the Superintendent. "But it is. Most of the cameras are made to be taken apart, and all of them, except the very smallest, could have been used to hide a gun. But none of them has actually got a socket that fits the screw threads on the gun we found. Of course, we're not dealing with fools. It would have been quite easy to make the thing in two parts, with an outer metal bush that fits into the camera and is screw-threaded in the center to take the gun."

"I'm afraid that's right, too." Elfe thought it out slowly. His mind was not working with its usual calm precision, and that wasn't only because he had been up for two

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nights. For the first time he was beginning to weigh the odds against them. "I take it that as soon as he'd fired, the assassin would unscrew gun and bush—quite a natural sort of gesture—if anyone did spare him a second glance they'd think he was removing an exposed plate or something. Drops the gun down his trouser leg and onto the ground. Puts the bush in his pocket. Just an ordinary small piece of metal. By the way, they were searched pretty thoroughly, weren't they? Was anything of the sort found?"

"No. But by that time they'd crossed two hundred yards of grass field, and been standing about for half an hour. It could easily have been trodden into the ground. Or dropped down a drain."

"All the same, we'd better search for it," said Elfe. "And find it. We can't hold forty-five photographers on suspicion, even in a case like this."

There was a great deal to do, but, unfortunately for Elfe's peace of mind, very little that he could do himself.

There were forty-five men, with forty-five backgrounds that needed checking. There were forty-five cameras and one gun that needed a laboratory going-over; and thirty editors and fifteen agencies who had to be told why they couldn't have the photographs their men had taken of the biggest news event of the century.

("As long as *no one* gets a photograph, I don't mind," said the editor of the largest paper of all, quite genially. "But you release a single one to anyone ahead of anyone else and you'll raise a head of steam which will blow you out of Scotland Yard.")

Much of this could be attended to by the regular organization. But there were other matters, more subtle, less objective, which could be attended to only by Elfe's own department. The motives behind the killing. Known terrorist organizations. Pressure groups. The dim politics of the half world of secret agents, official and unofficial, of military attachés who had never been in any army and of trade delegates who dealt with anything but trade.

It was not at all plain, for example, to whose advantage the killing of Paraman, at such a time and place, might have been. To his successors? Yet it seemed clear from their reactions that it had come as a bigger surprise to them than to anyone else. To those who wished to increase the tension between England and Paraman's country, and might profit from such tension? Elfe was not a great believer in the figure of the world financier who manufactures wars and revolutions for his own enrichment. Most of the big financiers he knew were timid men who liked a thirty per cent margin of security for their money.

The really frightening thought was that the killing was probably

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quite illogical. There were at least three groups in England who would kill merely for killing's sake. Imaginary grievances, sterile causes, which were rooted in terror and flourished in the occasional sensational stroke.

"When we get to the bottom of the matter," Elfe said to Bliss, "we shall find that Paraman was killed because his predecessor had someone's aunt flogged in Poland twenty years ago."

"Doesn't matter who it is," said Bliss, "as long as we catch them. Did you see the *Trumpet* headline today?"

"I never read the papers," said Elfe.

Nevertheless, the writing was on the wall. In forty-eight hours at the most the Foreign Secretary was going to be on his feet answering the questions of a critical House; and unless he had some answers to give, public opinion was going to demand a scapegoat. And Commander Elfe had no delusions as to who would be cast for that role.

Early that evening he left his office and walked slowly down Parade Street, into the Park, past the south end of the Palace, and out into Buckingham Gate. In a lesser figure, his method of progress might almost have been described as furtive. He paused in front of the modest building which houses the Director of Public Prosecutions, and then, almost as if it were an afterthought, went inside.

The Commissionaire saluted as Elfe said, "Has Mr. Hughes gone home yet?"

"I don't think so, sir. Shall I tell him you're here?"

"I'll announce myself," said Elfe. He walked up one flight of steps and stopped outside a door marked *Deputy Director,* and underneath that, *Gladwyn Hughes,* and underneath both, *KEEP OUT!*

He opened the door without knocking and a white-faced black-jowled man, who was plotting something on a large sheet of graph paper pinned to the table, roared, "Get out," and then, looking up, "Come in. I thought it was that fool Langley. You don't happen to know a function of seven that combines with itself to produce either nought or infinity?"

"Not being a mathematician or a magician, no."

Gladwyn Hughes was both a mathematician and a magician. He completed the *Times* crossword puzzle every morning between Woking and Surbiton, had played contract bridge for England, and was capable of thinking in three different planes simultaneously. He had come to the D.P.P.'s office via the Legal branch of Scotland Yard and would one day head the C.I.D.

"You're worried about the Paraman case?"

"I'd like your help," said Elfe.

"Of course. Anything I can do. What do you want?"

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Elfe sat down in the shabby armchair. It was very comfortable.

"What we really need," he said, "is a fresh mind on the problem."

"Do my best," said Hughes. "I've read about it, of course. Tell it from beginning to end. It'll help you as well as me."

The long hand had gone right round the old-fashioned clock on the mantelshelf before Elfe had finished.

"It's a stinker," said Hughes. "If we were a totalitarian country we'd have all those cameramen in cells now, giving them Number One treatment, and the first to break down would be awarded the starring role in the forthcoming trial, and everybody else would be covered with coats of whitewash."

"Except me," said Elfe.

"Well, yes. I expect you'd have been shot already. *Pour encourager les autres.*" Hughes looked curiously at Elfe. As a psychologist, it always interested him to see how his superiors and colleagues reacted under pressure. He thought Elfe was doing quite well. A little tight round the mouth, but plenty in reserve still.

"Could I see the films?"

"Now?" said Elfe. "Yes. I expect so. If I telephone from here they could have them ready by the time we get there."

In the basement of Scotland Yard there is a tiny private cinema, at which very odd films are sometimes shown. The two men settled into their seats, and the white fanlight of the projector cut across the darkness.

"This is the longest version," said Elfe. "Unfortunately, the focus is on the Prime Minister and Paraman. You can see the photographers, but they're a bit blurred."

"Again," said Hughes a little later. And still later, "Again." The second time he had a stop watch in his hand. The third time he made notes.

As they came out of the projection room Hughes said to Elfe, "I want to get hold of one of those newsreel cameramen. A reliable one. Can you do that? I've got the glimmering of an idea. If it comes to anything, where can I find you?"

"At my flat," said Elfe. "I don't suppose I shall go to bed."

It was two o'clock in the morning when Hughes arrived. His eye was bright, and he said "No" regretfully to the whiskey that Elfe pushed across. "I've been drinking with an Irishman called Milligan. I survived, but only just. Now, I'm going to strike a bargain with you."

Elfe cocked an eye at him.

"If I give you the idea that leads to the man you want, will you let me stay in on the case until the end?"

Elfe hesitated barely a second, then said, "Yes, of course."

"All right. Then here it is. All

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you've got to do to locate your chap is to develop *all the films and plates* in their cameras."

"There are about three hundred of them."

"It doesn't matter if there are three thousand. What my cameraman told me—and, remember, they see dozens of receptions every week—was this. The normal drill at an airport is that the photographers are marshalled up, in a sort of column. They're not allowed to dodge all over the place. The ones in front take their shots and then it's an understood thing that they then stand aside and the next lot take theirs—and so on. It works quite well normally, because if you've got a lot of agency boys there, they don't all want the *same* picture. One lot will take the exit from the plane, the next will snap the walk across the tarmac, the next the ceremonial handshake, and so on. You follow me?"

"Yes, but—"

"Wait. Unfortunately, in this case, it didn't work that way. The occasion was unique. Everyone was impatient. Instead of staying put and doing the thing in an orderly way, the photographers behaved like a lot of bobby soxers, dodged the police, and strung out *in a single line* across the runway."

"Yes. The film showed all that, but—"

"Wait again. That meant they all had an equal chance of taking a photograph. And I've no doubt at all that they all did. *Except one.* He couldn't. He had a gun in his camera. Remember?"

Elfe breathed out slowly.

Then he mumbled, "I said it needed a fresh mind. Keep in touch."

At eleven o'clock the next morning the red telephone on Mr. Hughes's desk sounded off and the voice of Elfe said, "Bull's-eye, Gladwyn. It's a Mr. Lampeter. Works for the Multum in Parvo Agency in Shoe Lane. Founded three months ago. Directors Mr. Smith and Mr. Robinson."

"What are you going to do?"

"We shall try some shock treatment," said Elfe. "Stay where I can reach you."

Lampeter was worried. He had done just what he had been told, both at the time and afterward.

"Afterward is important," Mr. Smith had said. "Just behave quite normally. They'll confiscate your camera, of course, but it won't tell them anything. You've got another. Go out and get on with the job."

So, for two days and the beginning of a third, Mr. Lampeter had sat in the backroom office, with the deaf and dumb girl, and had sallied forth to photograph two weddings, a presentation of athletic trophies, and the birth of triplets.

But he wished that They would get in touch with him. They had told him it would be soon—but three days! And then the incident of that morning. It had upset him.

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The dumb girl made a mooing noise to attract his attention and he looked up. The red light was showing above the side door—the one which led by the emergency staircase to the back entrance in Pepys Court.

He jumped to his feet and unlocked the door. Mr. Smith and Mr. Robinson came in, and something in their faces chilled the welcome from Mr. Lampeter's lips.

"What is it?" he said. "What's happened? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Robinson. "What happened to you this morning?"

"At the wedding?"

"Yes."

"It was all a mistake. A big man bumped into me in the crowd. He apologized. Somehow I lost my wallet. It was found later in the corner of the room. I suppose I must have dropped it there."

"Was there anything in it?"

"Just some money. And my commutation ticket. How did you know about it? Were you there?"

"We were there," said Mr. Smith. He did not think it necessary to explain that Lampeter had not been out of their sight since he left the airport.

"The man who bumped into you. Did you know he was a detective?"

"A detective! Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. His name is Sergeant Hibley. And he is in the Special Branch."

"But why?"

"I should think it's quite plain," said Mr. Robinson brutally. "They wouldn't pick your pocket for love."

There was silence in the tiny dusty office. The deaf and dumb girl broke it by pushing an envelope into her typewriter and addressing it noisily. She disliked the shape of Mr. Robinson's mouth, and Mr. Smith's eyes frightened her.

"You remember," said Mr. Lampeter, breathlessly. "You promised that if anything went wrong you would look after me."

"Of course," said Mr. Smith. "We said it and we meant it. The car's outside. Get your hat and coat."

Mr. Robinson wrote on a piece of paper, "We shan't be back today. Lock up when you go," and pushed it in front of the girl who looked at it indifferently. Men, with their comings and goings and self-importance, meant little in her private world.

"The car's outside," said Mr. Smith. He looked at his watch and made a calculation. It was five o'clock on an early summer evening. They had almost four hours of daylight ahead of them. It should be enough.

"I've always wanted to see how you manage this part," said Gladwyn. He sank into the back seat of the car. "When do we sight them?"

Elfe nodded absently. He was

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busy with a roll of large scale maps. Beside the driver a young police wireless operator with black eyes and a cheerful, gipsy face twiddled the dial of the set.

"We flushed them ten minutes ago," said Elfe. "Shoe Lane, up Ludgate Hill, along Cannon Street, over London Bridge. New Kent Road. Old Kent Road."

"If you're not following him," said Hughes, "who is?"

"No one, really. That isn't how it works at all. This is the first part of Operation Network." He demonstrated on the map. "There are a limited number of places you *must* go past when you leave London. If he breaks Southeast, I give the codeword and about twenty-five posts are manned—each with a wireless—easy, really . . . Has he got past New Cross, Illingworth?"

"Coming up to it now, sir."

"Right or left?"

There was a moment's pause, then the set crackled. "Left, sir."

"Looks like A.2."

"What happens when he gets out in the open country"?

"You'll see," said Elfe.

The car slid on through the warm summer evening.

"A.2 it is, sir," said the operator. "We're going to air control now."

"Do you mean to say you do it with airplanes?"

"One airplane, way up, to coordinate. The real work is done by helicopters. They are the ideal answer to a car in open country. Keep above a closed car and a bit behind it, and ten to one the people inside don't even know it's there. The real limitation is speed. If the controlling aircraft sees that the helicopter is getting left behind it whistles up another from in front."

"I see," said Hughes. "Have you any idea where those characters are taking Lampeter? Or what they're going to do with him?"

"Bypassing Dartford," said the operator. "On Rochester Road."

Elfe marked the location on his map and said, "I could guess the answer to the second question."

Mr. Robinson was an expert driver, and he drove his car hard. Lampeter sat in the back with Mr. Smith.

Once, as the milestones showed Rochester approaching, he said, "Where are we going?"

"To the coast," said Mr. Smith. "We'll have to hide you until we can get you out of the country."

"I see," said Lampeter. He shivered a little, and Mr. Smith looked down at him curiously. "There's nothing to be frightened of."

"I'm not frightened," said Lampeter. "I had a feeling that I'd been asleep for a long time, and was just waking up."

"Perfect," said Mr. Smith. "We turn off here, I think."

The car threaded a network of byroads, which degenerated into country lanes. Ahead of them lay

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the sea. Lampeter could sense it.

"Down here. It doesn't look like much of a track, but it'll take the car."

Suddenly they were out of the close country and on the marsh. A short, straight, sandy track, pointing out like a finger to a tumbledown house and barn.

"Is this where I hide?"

"This is where you stop," agreed Mr. Smith.

The car came to a halt. Mr. Robinson cut the engine and they climbed out.

In the silence they could hear the birds at evensong, the distant complaints of the marsh cattle, and the buzzing of a million insects.

Lampeter pushed open the door of the old house and went inside. A few minutes later he came out, a puzzled look on his face.

"There's nothing there," he said. "Nothing for cooking, no bed—"

He stopped. Mr. Robinson had come round from the back of the car. He carried a spade. Mr. Smith was taking something from his pocket.

For a fattish man in bad training Lampeter moved quickly. And he moved in the one direction which gave him a chance—between Mr. Smith and Mr. Robinson.

Mr. Robinson swiped at him with the spade and missed. Lampeter ran with the speed of fear. Then there was a sharp crack, and a curious sound like the clapping of soft hands as the air opened and shut over his right shoulder. Then it was as if steel fingers had gripped him by the arm. The force of it almost spun him round, but he kept on running. There was a gate ahead and a line of bushes. And through the bushes something winked suddenly, in the sun. It was the windshield of a car, moving.

"Help," croaked Lampeter, through dry lips. Then something caught him full in the back and the earth rose up at him and the red globe of the sun swung round full circle and he was diving into merciful blackness.

As he went down he seemed to hear, far off, two more shots. . . .

Elfe looked down at the three men. Mr. Smith and Mr. Robinson were dead.

"That's always the way of it," he said to Gladwyn Hughes. "If things go right, they're terrific. If things go wrong, they destroy themselves. In their code, it's the only answer to failure."

"Is Lampeter dead?"

"Three parts. But I think we'll be able to pull him back."

"Why bother?" said Hughes. He looked at the spade and mattock. "Wouldn't it be easiest to finish the job, and bury them all?"

"My dear Gladwyn," said Elfe. "You can't be serious. Our job is to patch the little man up, then put him in the dock and deal with him according to law. Right? Right."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**BRETT HALLIDAY**
TITLE:	***Not — Tonight — Danger***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Mike Shayne
LOCALE:	Miami Beach, Florida
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The theft of a petit point evening bag and of a $250,000 diamond were the minor crimes that puzzled, but did not baffle, Mike Shayne.*

THE TELEPHONE IN MICHAEL Shayne's Miami apartment began ringing as the redhead entered shortly after eleven o'clock.

A man's voice answered Shayne. A precise, cultivated voice, with an unmistakable New England accent; it sounded thin and agitated.

"Is that Michael Shayne, the detective? Thank heavens I've reached you. This is Mr. Schoolman speaking. Harold Schoolman." The voice was reproving, as though Shayne were expected to apologize for having been out.

Shayne grinned slightly and said, "I don't know you, do I?"

"No. I'm staying at the Splendide Hotel on Miami Beach. Something terrible has happened, Mr. Shayne. I must consult you."

Shayne glanced at his watch and tugged at the lobe of his left ear. "If you want to come here?" he said tentatively. "If it can't wait until morning?"

"It definitely cannot." The precise voice became agitated again. "You see I . . . I hardly know how to say this, Mr. Shayne. I . . ." There was a sound of a desperate gulp at the other end of the wire. "I've done a horrible thing. I'm . . . a thief."

"Wait!" Shayne came alert fast. "Splendide Hotel? Are you telling me you snatched the Montalba diamond this afternoon?"

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"Good heavens, no! Nothing like that, Mr. Shayne. I wasn't even present at the concert when it happened, though my wife was. This is another matter entirely, but extremely embarrassing to me. I'm only a few blocks from your place at the moment, Mr. Shayne. If I could come up and explain . . . ?"

Shayne said, "Come along."

For a moment he'd thought luck might be pushing something important his way. The fabulous Montalba medallion, boldly stolen from the Duchess at the Hotel Splendide that afternoon, was insured for two hundred grand. There would be a nice reward.

He was sure it must be Boston when Mr. Harold Schoolman arrived a short time later. He was a slight, middle-aged man with a bulging forehead and rimless glasses. From the dull gleam of his discreetly polished shoes to the neat bow tie, he was the embodiment of bleak, down-East decorum and probity.

He gave Shayne a limp hand. "This is the most upsetting experience of my life. I find myself a criminal, Mr. Shayne. Inadvertently, but a criminal nonetheless. I implore you to find the owner of the stolen property and return it at once."

"Sit down and tell me all about it." Shayne moved back to his chair. "A spot of brandy to settle your nerves?"

"No, thank you. I seldom indulge after dinner." Mr. Schoolman sat on the edge of a chair, reached in a side pocket and brought into view a small, exquisitely beautiful *petit point* evening bag with enameled gold clasp and a loop of thin gold chain.

"I bought this for my present wife last Christmas. Note the distinctive, pastoral design, after Watteau. It cost three hundred dollars, Mr. Shayne, and you see there's a chain to go over the wrist for safety while it is being carried."

Shayne nodded and watched the Bostonian's strained face with some amusement.

"But my wife is exceedingly careless. She refused to use the chain, though I repeatedly warned her how easily a sneak thief might snatch it from under her arm. She was . . . ah . . . a member of the WAC before we were married, and the experience gave her quite an unfeminine feeling of self-sufficiency, I fear.

"I decided she should be taught a lesson. We were leaving the hotel at nine o'clock for a party here in Miami. It was raining hard and there was a crowd under the marquee waiting for cabs, pressed close together to avoid the rain.

"I left Alice to slip the doorman a dollar bill, and when I pushed back to her side I saw the expensive bag just begging to be stolen. So I took it, Mr. Shayne. It was just as I had warned her. She had tucked

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the bag carelessly in the crook of her white fur sleeve, and she was not even aware it had been taken.

"At that moment, some hearty football types shouldered their way between us and I momentarily lost sight of Alice. The doorman waved that he had a cab and we both pushed forward through the jam and drove away with the bag securely in my pocket.

"I then put my little plan into effect. Peering in my wallet, I said, 'Nothing smaller than a ten for the driver. Do you have a dollar bill in your bag, my dear?'"

Harold Schoolman paused in his recital and swallowed hard. "Mr. Shayne, you will never guess what happened."

Shayne grinned at him, "Your wife answered, 'Yes, dear,' and took a bill from her Watteau bag. You thrust your hand into your pocket and realized you were no longer a respectable member of society, but had become a sneak thief. In the crowd, you mistook another woman for your wife, one wearing a similar white fur jacket and with a similar evening bag. So you snatched the wrong one. Isn't there some identification inside?"

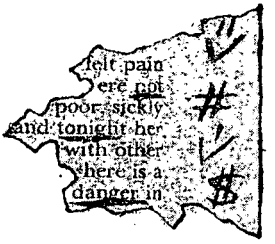
"There was nothing inside the bag."

"Nothing?" Shayne took the bag in his big hands. It was empty except for a small torn piece of coarse, grayish paper, with a margin on the right and portions of printed lines on the left.

"Only that," said Schoolman despondently. "A piece torn from a galley proof, with proofreader's corrections on the margin. Why any woman would carry it in her evening bag is beyond my comprehension."

"Galley proof?" said Shayne sharply. "How do you know?"

"It's obvious," said Schoolman impatiently. "I'm a publisher in Boston, you see. It can hardly be anything else with those proof corrections in the margin:



He pointed to the top penciled marks. "Quotation marks, you see. The next is the printer's symbol for more space. Then a single quote that has evidently been omitted, and the final mark indicates that a dollar sign should be inserted."

Shayne nodded. "Three of the printed words are underlined. *Not. Tonight.* And *danger.* Looks like a message. You have any galley proofs in the hotel, Mr. Schoolman?"

"Certainly not. We're here on vacation. And when I'm home, I seldom bring work from the office. A message? Yes. My wife deduced that, also. But what can it mean?"

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Shayne shrugged. "That's what we'll have to find out. Were there many women wearing white fur coats like your wife's?"

"Possibly. I didn't notice. I didn't see my wife's face when I took the bag, of course. I was standing behind her. I saw the white fur and the familiar bag and naturally assumed . . ."

"I'd like to talk to your wife," said Shayne briskly, "and see if she noticed anything you didn't."

"Yes. Of course." Mr. Schoolman looked at his watch and stiffened. "I must be getting back to the hotel. I expect a long distance call at twelve fifteen from my daughter in Boston—from my first marriage. I left Alice at the party while I came here, and she promised to meet me in our suite at twelve thirty. Would you like to see her?"

"Very much," said Shayne. His gray eyes were bleak as he studied the scrap of paper with three words underlined. He replaced it in the bag, tossed off the rest of his drink, and rose. "I'll drive you to the Beach," he said.

It had stopped raining. A golden moon was riding high overhead as they reached the ocean-side hotel. Shayne parked his car in the driveway and looked at his watch—a little after midnight. As they entered the luxurious lobby, he said, "Suppose you go up to wait for your call. I'll nose around downstairs a while and join you in half an hour."

"Very well. Our suite is Six-Ten. Do you think . . . *can* you determine ownership of the bag and return it without publicity?"

"I'll try. There can't be too many Watteau bags in one hotel."

As Schoolman hurried toward the elevator, Shayne strolled across a lobby that suggested the Arabian Nights in a gaudier moment, to a nail-studded, leather door. He knocked and entered.

A pudgy man, seated at a desk, looked up at the redhead with a soft, wise smile. "Hi, Mike. What brings you here?"

"Hello, Branson." Shayne slid one hip onto a corner of the security officer's desk. "Had any robberies lately?"

The man flushed. "Maybe you'd like to take over the job of riding herd on a crazy Spanish Duchess and her quarter-million-dollar diamond she insists on displaying like a glass bauble."

"How did it happen? All I got was a flash over the radio."

Branson shrugged. "A benefit concert in the main ballroom. A hundred or more guests milling around and I've got two men helping me cover it. I'm on the Duchess myself, but you can't breathe down her neck every moment. So it happened at the punch bowl. A dame stumbled into her just as she was drinking a cup of punch. It spilled on her and there was a lot of confusion. A minute later she screams her damned medallion is missing.

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She's been begging for this for years, Mike. Wears it dangling from her neck on a thin chain.

"There were four persons close enough to clip the chain. A Mrs. Davis from Atlanta, who stumbled against her . . . insisted she was pushed. A Myrtle Hodson, unemployed secretary, who crashed the party. Lucille Lasalle, the movie actress, and . . . John Tarleton, who registered here yesterday."

"Gentleman John? Good Lord, Branson!"

"Gentleman John Tarleton," Branson agreed wearily. "With a record of arrests in every major world capital for suspected jewel thefts, and nary a conviction. Sure he got it. Right under my nose. I recognized him at once and grabbed him. We also grabbed the three women fast and they agreed to be searched, after we explained that John is suspected of always working with a woman confederate to whom he passes the loot. No soap. Tarleton pulled off another perfect one."

"So he passed the diamond and the chain clipper to some other woman before you got to him?"

"To any one of two or three dozen who pushed forward when the punch spilled. He had sixty seconds. That's all Tarleton needs."

"Arrest him?"

"How the devil could we? We had to let him go with an apology. All we can do is tail him and wait for him to contact his confederate. Monitor his telephone line. He can't as much as speak to a dame without us grabbing her."

"You didn't search all the other guests?"

"Lord, no. We'd be up to our necks in lawsuits if we did."

"And you didn't search the Duchess either?"

Branson's mouth dropped open. "It was *her* diamond."

Shayne shrugged. "You're positive it was genuine? I suppose she keeps it in your safe and you had a chance to inspect it carefully?"

"As a matter of fact, no. Each of our master suites is equipped with a small wall safe with a combination known only to the guest. She kept it there. What are you getting at, Mike? You suspect any funny business?"

"No. I dropped in on something else entirely. Any idea how many of your guests wear white fur coats?"

Branson scowled. "There were exactly three at this afternoon's shindig. I know because the Duchess wore one, and I checked the others to make it easier to keep an eye on the diamond."

"Who wore the other two coats?"

"Miss Lasalle, and a woman from Boston. Mrs. Schoolman. Why?"

"I don't know." Shayne drew the Watteau bag from his pocket. "Did your eagle eye notice any of these floating around this afternoon . . . preferably in conjunction with a white fur coat?"

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Branson picked it up with a frown. "You can't expect a man . . ."

"Frankly, no. What I really hoped was that this one had been reported stolen this evening. About nine o'clock. While a lot of your guests were jammed up outside waiting for cabs."

"Sorry." Branson looked completely bewildered. "Nothing like that was reported stolen."

Shayne said, "See what you make of the paper inside." He lit a cigarette and studied Branson's face while he took out the scrap.

"Three words underlined," Branson mused. "Could be some sort of message. A warning?"

"Could be," agreed Shayne, cheerfully. "You say you've got men on Tarleton. What were his movements this evening?"

Branson shuffled papers on his desk, picked one up, and read: "Directly to his room when we released him at five thirty. Stayed until eight. Ordered two drinks and a sandwich from Room Service. Down to lobby at eight twelve. Bought newspaper and cigar. Sat alone in chair and read until nine six. Spoke to no one. Went out at nine six where there was a crowd waiting for taxis as you seem to know. Stayed on fringe of crowd, closely observed, for ten minutes, then evidently changed mind about going out in rain. Returned to room. I've got men on both front and rear exits and he hasn't showed again." Branson sighed. "He's undoubtedly laughing at us."

"Probably. One thing more. Do you have any way of knowing whether either the Duchess of Montalba or your movie queen wore their white fur coats out of the hotel about nine o'clock?"

"No. They're not being tailed. We could ask them, I guess . . ."

The telephone interrupted him. He barked, "Security Office," listened a moment while his pudgy face went doughy. "I'll be up at once. Stay right there." He put down the phone and told Shayne heavily: "Harold Schoolman has just been murdered upstairs."

The woman who confronted them in the ivory and gold sitting room of Suite 610 was obviously fighting hard to hold back tears that seeped from under her eyelids. Like her husband, Alice Schoolman seemed to carry a wintry climate with her. The crisp, freshly waved hair was the sad brown of autumn leaves. The blue eyes were pale as ice, with a network of fine wrinkles at the corners.

She looked an oldish thirty-five, with tensely anguished features and blue-veined slender hands that twisted together as she stepped mutely aside to show them the figure of her husband, slumped on the floor beside a small table where a portable typewriter stood.

The upper rear of Schoolman's head was crushed, and blood still

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flowed from the gaping wound onto the carpet. A heavy, blood-stained whiskey decanter lay beside the body. From his position, it appeared that Schoolman had been seated in a chair before the typewriter, with his back to the door, when the fatal blow was struck. A single sheet of white notepaper was in the typewriter with the figures 2 and 3 typed on it.

The Bostonian had died instantly, and certainly not more than ten minutes before the detectives arrived. Mrs. Schoolman's white fur coat lay on the floor just inside the door, with a pair of long white gloves and a Watteau bag beside it.

"I returned from a party just a few minutes ago," she explained swiftly. "I expected Harold to be in because he was expecting a telephone call. I rang the bell but he didn't answer. I thought he was on the phone, and used my key. He . . . was like that. I knew he was . . . gone, so I called the operator." She slumped into a chair, covering her face with both hands.

Shayne said, "I'll cover the door, Branson. Go through the suite and see if he's hiding. It's been only minutes . . ."

Branson nodded and strode away. Shayne stood quietly by the open door, looking at neither the corpse nor the weeping widow, his ragged red brows low over hooded eyes and a look of intense concentration on his rugged features.

Branson returned, shaking his head. "All clean. And now you come clean, Mike. You've been asking a lot of questions about white fur coats and fancy bags. What's it all about?"

Shayne shook his red head impatiently. "I still don't know. Check Tarleton's room. Is it on this floor?"

"One above." Branson turned to the phone. Shayne looked down bleakly at the dead man and the typewriter. "Did you or your husband use this machine, Mrs. Schoolman?"

"I . . . mostly. H-Harold could only hunt and peck."

"What do the figures two and three mean to you? Can you think why your husband might have typed those out before he was killed?"

"I don't know," she said brokenly. "A message? But *what*?"

Branson came from the phone. "Gentleman John is in the clear again. He's been on the phone in his room chatting with a friend in New York for the past twenty minutes."

Shayne nodded. A trace of the tightness left his face. He took out the *petit point* evening bag that Schoolman had given him and asked Alice Schoolman, "Ever see this before?"

She looked at it with dilated eyes. "It's like mine on the floor. Isn't it the one Harold grabbed by mistake, thinking it was mine?

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Didn't he explain that to you?"

"He told me." Grimly, Shayne opened the bag and withdrew the scrap of paper and read, "*Not—tonight—danger*. He also showed you this. Do you agree these are proofreader's marks in the margin?"

"I suppose so. He said they were. He was a publisher, you know."

Shayne told Branson: "Ask the Duchess and Miss Lasalle to come here at once bringing their *petit point* bags with them. Have one of your men bring Tarleton also."

"Mike, I've got to know . . ."

"You want to get back that diamond medallion," Shayne reminded him harshly. "And clean up the murder. Get them here." He turned and stalked into the bedroom where he pulled a brocaded cover from one of the beds and brought it back to cover the body.

Branson turned from the phone. "Miss Lasalle is out. Her maid insists she has only jeweled evening bags. The Duchess refuses to come, and denies owning a bag like these."

Shayne was looking down at the torn scrap of paper and the two digits on the sheet in the typewriter. "I think I know why Schoolman typed those two figures before he died. Where is the private safe in this room?"

Alice Schoolman gestured to an inconspicuous silver dial in the wall above the divan. Shayne went to it slowly, asking her, "What is the combination?"

"The combination?" she faltered. "I don't . . . know. Harold set it this morning and didn't tell me."

Shayne scowled unbelievingly. "He didn't tell you? Why?"

"I don't know, really."

Shayne swung to Branson. "Can you get the combination?"

"Not a chance. Each guest sets his own when he checks into a suite. It's a simple one. Just two figures on the dial. You make two full turns to the right and stop. Then back to the second figure you've chosen. If Mrs. Schoolman doesn't know, we'll have to get an expert to open it."

Shayne turned the dial two full circles to the right, stopped on 2. Branson intervened when Shayne started to turn back to 3.

"Not that way. The first digit has to be larger. You can't turn back past zero."

Shayne frowned, made two more complete turns, stopped at 3. He turned back to 2. Nothing happened. He turned from the safe to see Alice Schoolman watching, pallid and frightened.

Shayne strode to the typewriter and studied the scrap of paper again. He looked down musingly at the typewriter and pushed one of the keys with his forefinger. An 8 appeared next to the 2 and 3 already on the sheet. He pressed another key and had four figures in a row: 2384.

He told Branson grimly: "That's the real message that was hidden

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in the bag Schoolman stole. Not the three underlined words. They were camouflage to draw attention away from the four penciled symbols in the margin. Quotation marks, a space symbol, single quote, a dollar sign . . ."

He pointed to the symbols on the top row of the top line of keys. "Right in front of us. A beautifully simple code. The same key that has quotes is also the figure two. The space symbol is a three. A single quote and a dollar sign—eight and four."

"Two, three, eight, four," repeated Branson. "So what?"

"Try eight and four on the wall safe," said Shayne grimly. "When it opens, reach inside and take out the diamond medallion that Gentleman John snatched this afternoon and passed on to his confederate for safekeeping while he was being searched."

Branson was on his way to the safe when Alice Schoolman was out of her chair and on him like an avenging fury, clawing his face and screaming hysterically, every iota of Boston calm forsaking her.

"She had to kill her husband," Shayne told Branson later. "As soon as she walked into the suite and saw him at the typewriter picking out the two and the three. He'd evidently remembered the proof marks and just noticed the juxtaposition of those symbols and numbers on the top row of keys. She knew the jig was up right then. Twenty-three and the combination to the safe in the suite."

"What was the twenty-three for?" asked Branson.

"Twenty-three hours. Eleven o'clock. Don't forget she was in the WAC and learned the military way of reckoning time. Those were the two items of information she had to pass on to Tarleton after bringing the diamond up and putting it in her own safe this afternoon. The two things they couldn't set beforehand when they planned this coup so carefully in Boston where Tarleton picked her as his accomplice and made love to her. They couldn't afford to see each other or speak together after reaching the hotel, yet Tarleton had to know when the suite would be vacant and the combination Schoolman selected this morning.

"Tarleton knew he'd be watched every moment after the robbery, and bought her another Watteau bag as a means of passing the information. She had them *both* with her when she went down tonight, the decoy bag under her arm.

"Imagine how Tarleton must have felt when he followed her from the lobby to pick up his information . . . and had to stand helplessly by while her uncomprehending husband snatched the bag from her in front of his eyes. To teach his wife a needed lesson on the perils of carelessness," Shayne ended sardonically.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MORTON WOLSON**
TITLE:	***The Glass Room***
TYPE:	Detective Story (with sidelights on Rex Stout, Ellery Queen, Carter Dickson, and Agatha Christie)
DETECTIVE:	Inspector Anthony J. Quinn
LOCALE:	New York City
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Meet a tough Deputy Inspector who obviously reads modern detective stories but just as obviously hates their guts, and their perpetrators even more so. A unique blend of hard-hitting parody and vigorous detection.*

ANTHONY J. QUINN. HIS TITLE was Deputy Inspector. He ran the midnight shift from a small office in Center Street and had granted me the first interview of his long career.

"You're the fella wrote that book, *The Kippered Cove,* ain't you?"

"*The Covington Caper,*" I amended, pleased, a sensation he promptly reversed when he continued:

"It stinks. And I'm gonna tell you why. That's why I asked you in. I figure you'll pass the word along and then maybe you detective story writers will stop puttin' out such baloney. I mean like showin' up cops, and impossible situations, and how your detectives solve cases like they was playin' chess. Like this fat guy who putters around with flowers and never moves outta his house. Anybody rich gets tangled in a homicide looks him up first thing. Next thing, he's got this stooge—what's his name? Artie?—runnin' all over the map to locate suspects and make wise-

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cracks at 'em. And finally he bulldozes the whole kit and caboodle —all the suspects, witnesses, and cops—into his office where he talks up a storm provin' Mrs. Van de Lacey's son ain't her son but really her first husband who hadn't gone down on the Andrea Doria after all, which makes the dimwit nephew faint long enough for a doctor to discover he's a she, makin' the unidentified body the real dimwit nephew and the maid the real son in disguise, and all of it a hocus to save the family business with the insurance. And only by the fat guy yellin' at Artie does Artie knock the compact out of Mrs. Van de Lacey's hand, then shoot the fer de lance poppin' out of it, which Fatty figured because her nose was shiny. The cops are chewin' their nails right up to their knuckles, but Fatty just putters around with his flowers and thinks it out like chess. Fox."

"You mean Nero Wolfe?" I ventured.

"Fox, Wolfe, it makes me sick!" Inspector Quinn growled, then turned to the uniformed sergeant who had appeared in the doorway. "What's up, Finnegan?"

"Llewelynn caught it at the Owl Club," Finnegan said. "In his Adam's apple. Lieutenant Cohen had Ryan call to ask if you want to take over, an important guy like Llewelynn."

"Lloyd Llewelynn?"

"Yeah. In a phone booth," the sergeant said. "Just off the floor, in view of the rear tables. Everybody sittin' there saw him go in the booth, includin' a couple of men Vice had there to check Fifi Gail's act. The Vice men took over as soon as the girl screamed. They—"

"What girl?" Quinn cut in.

"Ryan said it was the cigarette girl. Helen Axlerod. She always went to the rear when Fifi Gail came on. This time she looked in the booth and saw Llewelynn twisted around in it with blood dribblin' out his neck and she screamed. Accordin' to Ryan, the Lieutenant thinks it was a .22, from the size of the hole. Ryan said the Vice men took over the second the girl screamed. Made 'em all stay put while one of 'em called Homicide. Ryan said it was touch and go with the parrots, the way they went flyin' and squawkin' all over the place. But everything's under control now, and Lieutenant Cohen wants to know—"

"You already said that," Quinn interrupted, then favored me with a sardonic smile. "Here's a case in point, practically made to order. Just the sort of setup you writers have your detectives solve like chess while the cops go stumblin' around deaf, dumb, and blind. Cohen's a good man. Learned Homicide from the ground up. You'll see what I mean. Know Llewelynn?"

"Not personally," I said. "But I've read his newspaper column and I've seen him on TV."

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"It takes a strong stomach," Quinn muttered. He turned to the sergeant. "Got that, Finnegan? I want progress reports. Tell Ryan to tell Lieutenant Cohen that much as I like to see that loose-lipped Peepin' Tom where he's been long overdue, the pleasure's all his. Steffanson."

"Sir?"

Quinn gestured irritably. "That ex-congressman Llewelynn's been roastin' over salary kickbacks. And he's been workin' over Fifi Gail lately, hasn't he? Somethin' about joinin' Commie fronts in school? Ask Ryan if anyone connected with either was sittin' anywhere near that booth. And then bring me all the latest Llewelynn columns you can find."

When Sergeant Finnegan had left, Inspector Quinn turned to frown at me. "Take this fellow always showin' up the cops, even his old man who's supposed to be an Inspector. They get a case tore apart, all the data in and nothin' left but put together the pieces and nab the killer, but a fat chance they get to do it. They're stumblin' around arrestin' innocent people like a pack of clowns while this squirt is laughin' up his sleeve, in a nice way, maybe, but laughin' —and at his own old man, God help him!—because he'd chessed it out that the victim's allergy rash had been brought on by the one suspect in the case wearin' a wool suit. King."

"Ellery Queen?" I hazarded.

Quinn nodded vigorously. "Psychology, shmychology! As if I'd let my own son stick even the end joint of his pinky into a homicide without I'd chop it off, not to mention it is absolutely impossible to beat trained cops on a scene with an answer. Put that down in your notebook and—"

He broke off as Sergeant Finnegan reappeared with a stack of tabloids, each opened to a Lloyd Llewelynn column. Finnegan laid them on the desk and said, "Ryan says they can't find the pistol. Llewelynn was alive when Fifi Gail's act started. A lot of people, includin' the Vice men, saw him go into the booth and grab the receiver where it was hangin' and yell into it like he was sore. And just then the lights dimmed and Fifi Gail came on with her parrots, and—"

"What's that to do with not findin' the pistol?" Quinn interrupted.

"Well, the only two ways out of the Owl Club are past the checkroom or through the kitchen, and two checkroom girls and five men workin' in the kitchen say nobody passed 'em since Fifi Gail came on. And the Vice men had everybody in the room stay put. They're still put. Nobody's left the Owl yet. And everybody in it's been frisked, with policewomen brought in to run the dames through the powder room one at a time. And the prem-

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ises got an inch to inch search, floor to ceiling, Ryan says. And no pistol."

He waited uncomfortably as Inspector Quinn frowned down at Lloyd Llewelynn's latest column. "What do you mean, the phone receiver was hangin'?" Quinn finally asked.

"It wasn't a call *he* was makin'. Someone callin' *him*. That's how Llewelynn got most of his tips. People would be leery of usin' house phones, where there might be a tap. So they kept track of public phone numbers in the joints he hung out in. This was a man, the cigarette girl said. She came over and told Llewelynn about the call while he was arguin' with Gail. Jack Gail. That's Fifi's brother. Everybody was watchin' 'em. Ryan said practically everybody there remembers seein' Llewelynn walk into the booth and pull the door shut and then turn to shake a finger at Jack Gail before pickin' up the receiver and talkin' into it. And then the lights dimmed and everybody began to watch Fifi Gail come on with her parrots. You know, she dances to waltz music and the parrots fly around and pull off one thing after another, until—"

"Never mind that." Quinn scowled.

"Well," Finnegan concluded lamely, "the next thing, the girl screamed, and that was it. But Lieutenant Cohen can't find the pistol."

Quinn glared at him. "Nobody even heard the shot?"

"No, sir. Fifi Gail comes on to loud music, and with the parrots squawkin' nobody heard anything until the girl screamed. And Ryan says from the time Fifi came on nobody was near the booth, not even waiters. She has it in her contract that nobody moves during her act, not even bus boys. It makes her parrots nervous, she says. That's why the cigarette girl went to the rear in the first place."

"Did anyone think to find out if the phone connection was still open?" Quinn demanded.

"Ryan didn't say."

"Ask him," Quinn ordered and then raised his eyes from the column he had been scanning to tell me: "I ain't got the language to say what I think of this guy who's always hocusin' up impossible situations. Like a room that's been empty and sealed for a hundred years, its windows warped shut, the bolt on the door rusted solid, and no other way in. But when a reason comes up to get in, they chop through the door and inside they find a freshly knifed corpse. But no knife. And no killer. Later they locate the knife with traces of that guy's blood on its blade and where is it?—inside a locked museum case in a city a thousand miles away where all the museum attendants swear it's been layin' untouched for ten years."

"Locked room plots," I said.

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"In all my thirty-two years on the Force," Quinn scowled, "I never ran across anything that crazy. But this special dick this guy writes about runs into practically nothin' else, and once or twice a week. How the stiff got planted in that room and how that museum knife did it is nothin'. This putterer chesses it out right off—like the knife didn't, but the killer took a small vial of the stiff's blood to that museum and sprayed some through a tiny hole in the case onto the blade, and then he sent in an anonymous tip about it because he knew somethin' *that* screwy would be handed this special dick, who was his pal and he figured he would bring him along on the case, givin' him a chance to see if he was gettin' away with it; and the stiff got planted in the room *after* the door was chopped in, while everybody was runnin' around lookin' for a light. All this the British bloke figured right off, but does he let on? He might save three or four more stiffs from accumulatin' by tippin' Scotland Yard, but that would spoil *his* fun, which is chessin' out every last little angle first—like why the preacher wore a wig—so he can stage a big surprise climax with everyone askin' how this happened and how that happened, givin' him a chance to talk about ten pages of real simple explanations anybody named Einstein can understand. Dickens."

"Carter Dickson?" I suggested.

He nodded emphatically, then turned to glare at Sergeant Finnegan materializing before his desk again.

"Lieutenant Cohen checked the phone right off," Finnegan said. "Dead line. They found only Llewelynn's prints on the receiver. What's really got Lieutenant Cohen down, accordin' to Ryan, is he don't see how it could have been done."

"Why not?" Quinn muttered, his eyes dropping to the newspaper column spread on the desk.

"Well, someone had to open the booth door to shoot Llewelynn. There's no hole in the door. Everyone saw Llewelynn pull it shut, and it was still shut when the girl screamed. The Vice men just opened it enough to make sure he was dead, then closed it until Lieutenant Cohen got there. And when he got the story he expected to find someone, outta all those people, who'd have been more interested watchin' Llewelynn than Fifi Gail. A dame. Or some regular who'd seen the parrots strip Fifi a hundred times already. But everybody he asked said they saw nobody go near the phone booth."

"There's your locked room," I smiled at Inspector Quinn. "A glass room, at that. And lighted. And with spectators all around it, including police. It adds up to one of those impossible situations, doesn't it?" But he had become

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absorbed in the column on the desk.

"Askin' for it," he muttered; "just beggin' for it. Listen to this: *Were a certain stripper's birds trained on vodka?* And this: *Cafe Sassity would convulse if it knew it's been in hatchet range of a released homicidal maniac the past few nites.* And here's another: *Attention T Men: How can Steffie keep squandering such oodles on the nitery circuit?*" Quinn shot me a wry glance. "In one of your books, a columnist messes someone's life, he may as well sign up with Woodlawn. Llewelynn's been messin' up lives at least twenty-five years and nobody before's even taken a poke at him." Quinn turned to the sergeant. "You got more?"

"Yes, sir. Ryan said Jack Gail had been tryin' to argue Llewelynn into layin' off his sister; said she'd joined those outfits in college because all the other girls did—like joinin' a social club—and it was at him Llewelynn was shakin' a finger when he went into the booth. One of the Vice men said Gail shook a finger right back at Llewelynn. And a lot of people said they saw Steffanson, who was sittin' at the next table, point his fork at Llewelynn and wiggle his finger like he was triggering a gun."

Quinn's face tensed. "Anything else?"

"Well, ever since the girl screamed, Congressman Steffanson's been havin' a laughin' jag. But there wasn't a pistol anywhere near him, not even in his spaghetti, or inside Jack Gail's champagne bucket. But Lieutenant Cohen's gonna make 'em both take paraffin tests anyhow."

"Tell him not to bother," Quinn said tiredly, shoving the stack of tabloids aside. "Tell him to pick up that cigarette girl. Axton?"

"Helen Axlerod."

"Her," Quinn said. "Tell Lieutenant Cohen to take it easy how they do it. She'll have the .22 somewhere around her cigarette tray, maybe taped under it. Have him ask her how long she's been out, and who she chopped to get in in the first place. That should bust her wide open."

Turning back to me as Sergeant Finnegan left, Quinn slammed his fist on the desk. "This other guy—no—it's a dame, gives me the revolvin' willies. She got another putterer, some kind of foreigner with a Q and A routine. He interviews all the witnesses and solid-alibied suspects and then sits back and juggles what he calls his 'gray cells' and decides he hadn't asked the right questions. So he interviews 'em all over, sits back again for another 'gray cells' juggle and comes up with still more questions he'd missed. And while witnesses are droppin' like flies and the cops fumble around stackin' up false arrest suits, he runs whoever's still alive through the grinder once

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again, and this time his 'gray cells' remember that the most innocent survivin' witness combs his hair on the left side instead of how his alibi snapshot shows, on the right —so the alibi modern clock in the picture's background ain't pointin' to ten o'clock, when the original killin' happened, but four hours later—to two o'clock, which makes Lefty guilty and Scotland Yard a bunch of quarterwits, and himself the pussy's nightgown. Christmas."

"Agatha Christie?" I essayed.

"Another cop hater!" he nodded vigorously, then turned in exasperation to glare at the incredulity wreathing the approaching face of Sergeant Finnegan.

"Lieutenant Cohen was on the phone himself," Finnegan said. "He said she broke down like you said she would. The pistol was taped under her tray, where you said. She'd been outta the asylum two weeks. It had been a delivery man makin' a pass at her she'd chopped. But Llewelynn was wrong. It hadn't been homicide—just some slashes—and a jury had turned her loose. But it all made her so nervous she'd gone to the asylum herself. When she read how Llewelynn called her a homicidal maniac she figured the rest of her life would be loused up if it ever got known who he meant, so she went after him. She had the pistol taped under her tray two nights waitin' for him. And when he came tonight she faked the call just as Fifi Gail's act started, countin' on it to keep everybody lookin' away from the phone booth. Then she worked the gun loose and went back to the booth. Llewelynn opened the door a little himself to ask her what she meant by callin' him to a dead line. She screamed to cover the shot while she fired from under the tray and then kicked the door shut with her foot and kept on screaming, all the time taping the gun back under her tray. And that's all there was to it. Lieutenant Cohen wants to know how you figured it."

"For cryin' out loud!" Quinn snorted. "We playin' games now? You said yourself she was the only person near the booth, right? And then, only Llewelynn's prints were on the receiver, right? So what was she holdin' to her ear when the call was supposed to come in? She probably picked up the receiver by the cord and let it down, not wantin' her prints on it, figurin' they'd trap her—which they did, by *not* bein' on it. Could anything be simpler?"

Sergeant Finnegan bore his dazed expression from the office as Inspector Quinn whirled to level an accusatory finger at me: "As for how the detective in your own book sits back on his fanny and chesses out the case, let me tell *you*—"

"Aw, shaddup," I told him, then collected my notebook and hat, and left.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **BOB VAN SCOYK**

TITLE: ***Home from Camp***

TYPE: (see below)

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A tender, sensitive story not actually in our field . . . Or is that really so? Isn't this a poignant tale of one of the worst crimes in modern civilization? And one all too prevalent these days? Pity the poor victims . . .*

THE SOUND OF NOISY LITTLE BOYS was followed by the appearance of the wide yellow bus. The parents on the sidewalk took up the yell and it became a joyous welcome, an hilarious reunion, with strangers grinning at each other and sharing the joke that adults always seem to have about their children. The man in the tweed jacket stood apart, finishing his cigarette with slow, deep drags. His other hand played with the keys in the pocket of his dark slacks, his back resting against the wall of the 63rd Street YMCA.

"Hey, Mom! Hey, Dad!"

"Daddy!"

The bus braked at the curb and the double doors swung and folded back. The driver mopped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and tried to conceal his relief from the happy, waiting parents.

"Over here, Jackie! This way, here we are, son! Say, will you look at that tan!"

The boys piled out and each small face sought and found warm arms and familiar laughing mouths. Each skinny little kid held forth some hand-made beaded or leather object and each proud parent accepted the priceless offering in this ritual of boys returning from summer camp.

"You made this yourself? Well, Mother, what do you think of that? Made it all by himself."

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"Listen, where's your bag? And did you eat lunch?"

"Look how he's grown! Let me have a look at you now, I want a good look, now stop hopping around!"

His kid was the last to get off. He was even smaller and skinnier than he'd remembered. Small and skinny and pale, with thick-rimmed glasses and extra-large front teeth. Like a cross-eyed rabbit. The sunburned nose only made the rest of his face look chalky by comparison. He clutched his small black satchel in his left hand and squinted through his glasses. Their eyes met through a gap in the crowd.

The man in the tweed jacket took a final drag and flipped the cigarette away as the boy approached. His jacket stuck to the bricks for a moment as he straightened and he felt the old tenseness well up inside of him. The hand that mussed the boy's hair was awkward and the smile that went with it was too self-conscious, but he had to make some sort of a gesture to break the ice.

"Look at that nose, huh? Some sunburn you picked up."

The boy blinked. "It peeled a little."

The man took the satchel and together they walked away from the bus and the kids and the beaming parents.

"We'll cut through the park."

The boy put his hand to his shirt, hesitated, then brought it down. The man noticed the movement.

"Don't tell me you made one of those beaded gimmicks, too?"

The boy shook his head.

"Then what have you got there?"

The boy picked at the peeling skin on his nose.

"Nothing."

When he didn't offer his treasure for inspection, the man shifted the satchel to his other hand and lightly touched the boy on the shoulder. The boy looked up and blinked again.

"Eyes are a little red. Did you sleep last night?"

The boy shook his head.

"Most of the boys stayed up the last night of camp, huh?"

"Some of them."

They walked through the park. The boy didn't want to talk but the man wanted him to. It seemed strangely important at the moment. He took a fresh cigarette from the flat case and held it unlit between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

"Did you swim better this year than last?"

"A little. Not much better, though."

The boy pretended to examine a loose button on his shirt. His big front teeth pressed into his lower lip. The man stopped in front of one of the stone benches, motioned for the boy to sit down.

"Okay, let's have it. What happened this time?"

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He expected tears but there weren't any—just the eyes blinking dry behind the glasses.

"Did they pick on you again?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you tell on them, snitch to the counsellor?"

"No."

The man grinned. "Well, anyway, that's something. What did you do? Fight back?"

The boy shook his head again. He didn't want to talk because he was afraid he was going to cry. And he didn't want to cry.

"Good God! What's the matter with you, anyway? Even if you hated the camp you're home now, so forget it."

The boy pressed his hand over the loose button and held it there. He didn't look at his father.

"Okay. Next year you won't have to go. For sure, I mean. You can stay in the city with me. The way it was going to be this time. You're not still sore about that, are you?"

The boy shook his head, but this time very slowly, and his throat was working hard to keep down the wave of sobbing he could feel rising from his scrawny chest.

"I really couldn't help it," the man went on. "She gets nervous when little boys are around. She's not used to them, that's all. But next year . . ."

He saw the boy close his eyes and he tried to make his voice a little lighter to clear the air between them.

"Next year I'll send her packing to her Mother and Father up in old Beantown and me and you'll be a couple of bachelors together. Maybe even take in a ball game or go to the museum. Or whatever you'd like to do. The zoo, I don't care. How's that sound?"

When the boy didn't answer, the man stood and picked up the satchel. His tense fingers closed around the straps and made a tight fist.

"So don't worry about camp any more. We'll have a rare old time together and knock around like a pair of real buddies. But right now . . ."

He pointed to his wrist watch.

"I've got a date with you-know-who. Anyway, your Mother'll be wondering what happened to us. I told her I'd have you over there by three. Your stepfather's having a party for one of the boys and she wants you to be there."

He watched the boy closely to see if there would be any reaction to "stepfather"; but the boy's head was down and he couldn't tell.

"You've got quite a family these days, huh? Two of each. Hey, they'll probably want you to tell them all about camp. You know, you're pretty lucky. Your stepfather's kids would give their eyeteeth for a chance to go to camp. Too bad the old tightwad doesn't give them a break. Well, I'll be damned if I'll pay for 'em. It costs enough for one kid without . . ."

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He didn't finish. He turned away and started walking.

"Coming?"

The boy nodded. The loose button came off in his hand and he threw it away. As soon as the man was out of sight, the boy stuck his hand in his shirt. It stayed there for a moment, then withdrew. The boy looked at the baby turtle in his hand. Crude lettering on its back spelled out *Camp Joyful*. He held it to his mouth and gently kissed it.

"I am two inches taller," he told it, "and four pounds heavier and I have no fathers and no mothers and no stepbrothers and at camp I held a boy under water until he nearly drowned."

He turned the turtle loose under the bench and then slowly followed the man in the tweed jacket along the cinder path.

☆ ☆ ☆

Ellery Queen talks shop

How mystery stories are born; the first girl gumshoe; the sex life of a gentleman detective—these are some of the matters that get a witty, informed going-over in Ellery Queen's new book of anecdotes, reminiscences, and reflections. "It is the perfect browsing book," says the *Chicago Tribune*, "a volume of High Sherloctane not to be missed."

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Take a ride with the executioner—
a gripping suspense novelette

A GUN IS A NERVOUS THING

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

DOWN IN THE HEART OF THE California town a police officer—James Lord was his name—bent over a hospital bed and listened intently. The woman's bruised and swollen lips shaped sounds with difficulty, but he heard enough. At last he snapped erect, and went out into the corridor.

To the cop who was waiting there he said, "Can't tell you all of it now. Woman says her husband beat her up after their kid was shot. Says he's out gunning for the boy's teacher now—think she let him die. Ames is the teacher's name. Miss Eve Ames. Get on it quick. We are"—he glanced at his watch—"an hour and forty-five minutes late already."

At that moment Eve Ames stood at the window of a solitary hillside house, looking down over the darkening town. Behind her she heard her hostess, Frances Connor, say, "I'm afraid this thing *is* stiffening up," and Eve turned to look at the older woman, whose stout right leg with bandaged ankle was thrust out before her, resting on a kitchen chair.

"Hadn't I better call a doctor, Miss Connor?" Eve asked.

"Small chance to find a doctor in on six o'clock of a Saturday evening—even if I had a phone." Frances Connor was fifty and, as a school principal, used to authority. She spoke cheerfully and decisively: "It's nothing, my dear; I only scraped the skin. . . . I must get rid of that debris in the yard. Those concrete blocks are a menace to life and limb. I stumbled over one of them."

Eve Ames glanced back out the window. This little house was so new that the paper label still clung to the windowpane. Now that it was getting dark, the narrow yard, all raw earth and builder's litter, was obscured. Across the newly made street—it was only a scratch upon the hill and still rutted and dusty as the bulldozers had left it—the land fell away.

They were high upon the rim of the jeweled fan that the town resembled. The handle of the open fan rested, Eve fancied, in the sea, in the cove; and the town lay tilted, glittering, upon the rimming hills.

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Below, the main coast highway threaded the fan's fabric like a brilliant living ribbon.

"I'd better dress it again before bedtime," Frances Connor was saying. And Eve caught at her wandering attention.

"We left the extra gauze and tape in the car," she said. "Shall I get them?"

"No hurry. You may have to prepare dinner, Eve—fine hostess that I am."

"Are you hungry, Miss Connor?"

Eve, herself, was not hungry. She was reluctant to stir from her sad reverie, but her hostess was becoming impatient with it.

"Come and sit down, Eve," Frances Connor said. "But first, please put the screen across the window. Without draperies at night, this room is a goldfish bowl, and I don't altogether like it."

Eve Ames did as she was told. She was a tall, slender young woman in her mid-twenties, and she moved with unconscious grace. She sat down, let her breath out in a heavy sigh, and tried to smile.

Frances Connor's brown eyes, in her pouched and sagging face, were kind. "I'm a tough old bird, Eve," she said, lifting her white head to attack directly the younger woman's trouble. "I'd like to help you. Perhaps I can. Sometimes," she said austerely, "there is absolutely nothing you can do with a brutal, tragic fact but meet it with brute courage."

"I can't forget—he was only nine years old." Eve bit on her lip.

"We tried not talking about it," said Frances, "all day long. Let's go over all the 'if's' once more, and be rid of them."

Eve Ames folded her hands in her lap and considered how swiftly the whole terrible event of yesterday had exploded out of an ordinary Friday. She had been sitting in the schoolyard at the noon hour, supervising the children who were eating their lunches at the picnic tables. The schoolyard was a noisy place, a tangle of screams and shouts rose up all around, but her teacher's ears found this normal and not in the least alarming. By the same token, those trained ears caught the wrong note when a boy's high voice came loud close behind her.

Terry Lord, one of her own fourth-graders, was speaking: "Not supposed to point a gun at people —you're not supposed to, you dummy!" His voice was full of strain and even desperation.

Eve had had time to consider the word "gun" just long enough to assume he spoke of a toy. She'd seen the tiny gun that looked very much like a toy, and realized that Danny Mariot must have been pointing it directly at her own back. She'd caught Danny Mariot's eye.

Then Danny had said scornfully, in quick self-defense, "Aw, you're chicken. It's not even

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loaded. Lookit; I'll show ya." Then he had turned the gun upon himself.

The sound had not been loud enough to disturb many of the children. Eve, kneeling beside Danny on the blacktop of the playground, had said firmly, "Terry, go in at once and bring Miss Connor, please. Children, go quietly to your home rooms, all of you."

She'd known they were obeying because the screaming died off gradually as some of the older ones herded the rest. Then Frances Connor's voice had said, "Is he hurt?"

"He's dead," Eve had said.

All she had been able to see was Danny Mariot's eyes, that last look, soul to soul. His eyes frightened, and then cunning with a child's cunning. He had wanted to lighten his punishment by proving no serious intent.

Now she twisted her hands, helplessly.

Miss Connor was speaking calmly and relentlessly: "What happened was this: The boy found the intriguing little gun in his own kitchen. He smuggled it to school in his lunch box. He showed it off. In the classic phrase, 'He didn't know it was loaded.' Now, Eve, there's no validity to that one. He most certainly would not have taken it out while you were looking, and you know that."

"I know that. I'm all right, Miss Connor."

"Then, if Danny's mother had got herself out of her bed to get his breakfast and prepare his lunch, she'd have seen the gun and put it away. And here's another: If Danny's father, rising at 3 A.M. to go off hunting with his pals, hadn't planned to take the little gun to show for a curiosity, if he hadn't forgotten to take it, and, even worse, if he hadn't left a bullet in it in the first place . . ."

"Poor man," Eve said. "I wonder if he's back."

"Sure to be by now. Did you know him? Or Danny's mother?"

"Mrs. Mariot wasn't a PTA type."

Eve thought of the woman, a short, dumpy, youngish person with wild pale hair. "I've never met her, never met either of them."

"Poor people, pity them," said Frances Connor. "There are more 'if's' yet. If Terry Lord hadn't been properly taught how to behave with a gun, and hadn't spoken up, *you* might very well have got that bullet, Eve."

"I know."

"And again, if Danny Mariot *had* been properly taught, or had paid attention—"

"I can't say that," said Eve. "I cannot. It does not serve him right. He was only nine."

"I never said it wasn't a tragedy," said the older woman gently.

"The thing that bothers me, Miss Connor," said Eve earnestly, "is that Danny was a bit of a bully.

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The children were a little afraid of him. Now every parent in town is going to be saying, 'See what happens to wicked little boys,' and I wish—I wish the whole thing weren't going to seem to the children exactly like the villain getting his just deserts at the end of the program."

"You wish you could teach them," said Frances Connor affectionately, "an understanding of intricate chance and multiple blame that's beyond their years, I know."

They were silent in the raw little room with the bare floor and the empty, unpainted shelves.

"Don't you think," said Miss Connor, "that you might better take the car and go call Geoffrey? Let him take you to some glamorous eating place. I can manage perfectly well, Eve. After all, I can hobble."

"I'd rather stay," Eve said, almost abruptly.

But Frances Connor persisted: "Maybe you've turned the subject in your mind long enough. I'm afraid that I, a spinster school principal," she continued with perfect good nature, "don't represent much in the way of comfort. Whereas your beau—"

"Shall I start dinner?" Eve interrupted.

"Let's wait a little," Frances said. "It's all we have to do all evening." Her face was thoughtful.

Eve raised her eyes, good gray eyes, set deep in her well-boned face. "Miss Connor, you were wonderful with that poor, stupefied mother. You are good for me, too. You see this whole part of my life, my job, the children. This is all foreign to Geoffrey. He doesn't . . ." She faltered to a stop.

"My dear," said Frances Connor, pleased, "I think you are a fine teacher, although perhaps sensitive above and beyond the call of duty."

Eve was smiling for the first time in some hours because of the praise. "Which reminds me," she said more cheerfully, "six fifteen—it's Grif Griffin time. Can you bear it?" She reached over to turn on the radio. "You see, my fourth-graders think the sun can't set without Grif Griffin, and how am I to know what's in their minds?"

"You really listen every day?"

"Most days I try to, and it is a help. The other day there was an epidemic—everybody tapping his teeth with his thumbnail. Now, if I hadn't listened to Grif Griffin, I'd never have known what it was."

"What was it?"

"Griffin-eze." Eve's face was animated now. "That means, 'I have important news to tell.'"

"Signals, eh? You interest me," said Frances Connor warmly. "What's Grif Griffin like?"

"You'll see. I'd say he's a nice blend of Sherlock Holmes and Douglas Fairbanks, Sr."

During the commercials, Miss Connor watched her young colleague's face. A lovely girl, she

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thought; conscientious, fine-boned, fine-grained.

Frances Connor wished for her young friend the deepest and most complete happiness: a husband, children of her own, the full life. It had looked these past few months as if all this was on the horizon for Eve, ever since Geoffrey Taggart had begun to take her out. He was a part-time businessman, the owner of a flourishing shop where artists' materials were sold. The other part of his time Geoffrey, himself, tried to be a painter. He was the right age; he had both money and good taste; he was a most civilized man. Frances Connor, in the back of her mind, had already made the match.

Last evening, after the tragedy at school, Geoffrey and Frances, together, had kept Eve company in her apartment. Geoffrey had been concerned about Eve and most kind. It was possible that he did not, could not, see Eve's full problem; that she had more than her private shock and grief to overcome, that she must face the children Monday morning in some way that would best help *them*. How could a bachelor understand, thought Frances, when even parents scarcely realize how much more than the book lessons a teacher teaches?

"Grif's trailing the man in the blue suit," said the doom-fraught voice of Dusty, the faithful follower.

"What's he want us to do?" piped Smallfry, the boy aid.

"Keep down," said Dusty; "it's dangerous. Didn't you hear Grif sneeze three times?"

Eve was listening with only half a mind. It was a local program that sponsored local stunts and contests, and the town kids were entranced with it. A game, Eve thought. Checkerboard moves. Black against white. And the gun was power. Last man on the scene with a gun in his hand was top man, always. She shivered.

Never in her life before had she met brutal tragedy. She wondered whether she had the brute courage to match it.

When the Grif Griffin program was over, the news came on. Lost in her thoughts, Eve heard none of it until she caught her name:

"Alarm is felt for the safety of Miss Eve Ames, a fourth-grade teacher at Jefferson Elementary School."

Eve jerked erect, tingling. The voice went on:

"Martin Mariot, 33, whose nine-year-old son, Daniel, was accidentally shot and killed yesterday on the school playground, went berserk at 4 this afternoon. Mariot beat and critically injured his wife, Susan, in their canyon home. Neighbors who heard the woman's cries, summoned police. Mrs. Susan Mariot, 30, was taken to the hospital unconscious, but Mariot eluded capture and is still at large.

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"Mrs. Mariot regained consciousness at 5:45 long enough to tell police officer James Lord that her husband vows vengeance on the boy's teacher, Miss Eve Ames. The man believes that the teacher's delay in calling a doctor resulted in the boy's death. His wife says he has a gun, a twin to the small 22-caliber hand gun with which the boy shot himself yesterday during the lunch hour. It is believed the father, who was out of town when the tragedy took place, has become unbalanced by shock and grief. Lieutenant Lord says the boy died instantly with a bullet in his heart, but according to the injured woman, the distraught father will not believe this to be a fact.

"Ironically, Lieutenant Lord's nine-year-old son, Terry, was a witness to the death of the Mariot boy yesterday. Police rushed to Miss Ames's apartment on Hermosa Street, but failed to find her at home. Her whereabouts are not known. Police request anyone knowing where Miss Eve Ames is now, to contact them immediately.

"The man, Martin Mariot, is armed, and in his distraught state may be dangerous. He is 5′ 9″, wiry, dark hair, dark eyes, has upper joint of left index finger missing. Anyone seeing this man, please notify police at once. Your own station, KYOS, will stand by to give you latest developments."

Eve was on her feet.

"They'll be here any minute," Frances Connor said crisply. "The police, of course. Geoffrey will tell them."

"I lied to him," Eve said. "He doesn't know I am with you. I told him I definitely wouldn't be."

"Oh, Eve! And I have no phone yet—"

"I couldn't tell him," Eve said. "I wanted to be let alone, to think it all through. I didn't want to hurt his feelings."

"Yes, I see. But the police will have to know where you are."

"Yes, I know. I—don't want to have to deal with that—poor man," Eve said gasping.

"He is guilty," Frances Connor said. "His 'if's' are too many. He must know it."

Eve nodded.

Frances began to struggle up. "Well, we can't have you shot, Eve. We'll go to the grocery store down the hill."

"You needn't go, Miss Connor. Is the store still open?"

"Open till seven. Better hurry." Frances Connor settled her stout body back into her chair. "You'll go faster alone. Go on, then. Quickly."

Eve snatched up her coat and purse and the keys to Miss Connor's car. It was absurd that anyone should want to shoot her! She had only to drive downhill less than a mile, call the police from the phone in the little grocery store, and then perhaps stay there until protection came. She could do it.

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She wouldn't think about Martin Mariot at all.

But she was thinking of him just the same. She was thinking, "A man with a gun, and I understand. I pity him. But what good will understanding and compassion do me? I must go for the police, who have guns, too."

She stepped out the door and ran to Frances Connor's car. She backed it into the road and put its nose ready to go downhill. She was fumbling to find the way to switch the headlights full on. She had lit the dash and was peering at it, concentrated within the car, when the man's voice said hoarsely, "Miss Connor?"

She heard herself say, "Yes?" very sharply and impatiently. After all, she was in a hurry. She had no time for this man, standing in the road looking in at her, mumbling.

"The wife said you'd just built this place up here. I thought—"

"Who are you?" she said, flinging up her chin and speaking loudly. But she knew. Because his left hand grasped the window sill on the car's right side, and the first joint of the index finger was missing.

"Don't matter who I am," he mumbled, and his right hand came up into her sight. Sure enough, he had a little gun. His face was full of odd shadows and hollows, lit as it was from underneath by the dash light.

"Where's Miss Ames?" he demanded harshly. "She's your friend. Where is she? You better tell me, Miss Connor."

Only then did Eve realize that he had taken her for Frances. He'd called her Miss Connor before, and she'd said, "Yes," in a kind of reflex.

"I don't know," she said. "Excuse me, I'm just leaving." But she thought, her brain working with uncanny swiftness, "If I fool him and do drive on, and he finds Miss Connor, he may think she's Eve Ames." This seemed intolerable.

"Wait a minute." He was looking past her. Eve realized he could see a small portion of the room around the edge of the screen. What could he see?

"There's a dame in the house," he said. "Don't kid me. Old lady with a bum leg. Who is that?"

"My mother," said Eve promptly and haughtily, as if he should have known as much. "What's the matter with you? Do you want a lift?" She said this, pretending not to have seen the gun, because it occurred to her strangely detached brain that she was telling lies, and Frances Connor would have no clue to them. She could not leave him in the road outside this house. She was safe as long as he didn't know her. Once at the store . . .

"I need a lift," he said suddenly, and opened the door and got in. "Get going, Miss Connor," he sug-

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gested almost mildly. "No need for the old lady to start looking out the window."

So Eve let the brake off. There was nothing else that she could think to do. The car moved along the short level portion and dived down around a curve.

"I need a car," the man said loudly. His voice volume seemed to wax and wane, eccentrically. "The cops took mine."

"The cops?" she said with difficulty.

"You might as well know. I killed my wife this afternoon. I got nothing to lose. I'm going to kill your friend, Miss Ames."

The road dipped deep in a fold of the land, and it was dark and lonely. But just below was the store on the traveled canyon road.

"Do—" she swallowed. "Do you expect me to help you?" Her voice was breathy and light.

"Yeah," he said. "I gotta gun."

Her brain lost its clarity. Her thoughts began to dart now like frightened birds. Could she talk to him? Calm him? Explain to him? Coax him to the hospital? Or try to get the gun and be top woman?

It seemed to her that the steering wheel was shaking, not her hands. They were suddenly on level land, running between houses only a short way from the grocery store.

"Where was you going?" he said abruptly.

"I—to telephone." Her voice came out all right, only a little frightened.

"You got no phone up there in the house?"

"No."

"Wait a minute. Pull up. I gotta figure something."

So the car shuddered and stopped at the edge of the road. Eve let go the wheel and put her icy hands to her cheeks. A few yards ahead was the store, still lit, still open, and on the road cars passed them, going about their normal business.

"Hold on, now," he said. "Don't move." The gun in his right hand was pointing at her across his body. "Where is there a phone?"

"S-store," she stammered, making a gesture.

"This Miss Ames. She lives this side of the Coast road, don't she? 1215 Hermosa?"

"Y-yes."

"She there, you think?"

"I don't know. Listen, Mr. Mariot."

He turned his head warily.

"It was on the radio," Eve said.

"About me? The cops, I guess." He seemed to accept this without alarm. "That's how you knew me?"

"Your finger."

"That so?" he murmured. "And so it's on the air."

"Mr. Mariot," said Eve tensely, "You didn't kill your wife this afternoon. She's alive in the hospital; at least, she was able—"

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"She talked," he said immediately. "So they know I'm going for Miss Ames—that right? I saw you come tearing out." Now she felt him relax. "I thought you wasn't too surprised," he said.

He might seem relaxed, but he was shrewd. His brain, Eve divined, was running smoothly and freely, separate from his broken heart. So she could die. She'd better be careful. He was terribly dangerous, she knew.

But Eve said as calmly as she could, "Mr. Mariot. *Why?*"

"Shut up," he said. "I'm thinking." The hand with the gun called attention to itself. "So the old lady's got no phone, and no car, and a bum leg," he said. "So she's not going to tell the cops you're missing."

"M-missing?"

"Listen, Miss Connor," he said somewhat drearily. "Miss Ames being your friend, probably you don't want me to do this, but you're going to help me just the same. I could throw you out right here, and I could fix it so you couldn't talk real soon. I could do that, see? But I need a car, and I maybe need you to get me through to her. Nobody knows I'm gonna be in your car. And I think I need you for a phone call. That's a good idea."

"Phone call?"

"I want you go in that store and call Miss Ames's place and see if she's there. But you ain't gonna warn her about me, because I'll have my gun on you. Now, the phone in there's in a booth, isn't it?"

"No, it's just a wall phone."

"No booth?" He seemed dashed.

Eve shook her head. She thought of something. This couldn't last. Not another five minutes. The trouble was that Mr. Johnson, the grocer, knew her perfectly well. He had a daughter in her class. The moment she stepped inside that store, he'd sing out, "Hiya, Miss Ames," and what would this man do then? The man with the gun. Now silently pondering his problem.

She said desperately, "Mr. Mariot, I was there yesterday, and really, Miss Ames—"

"I know," he said harshly. "I know exactly, so don't talk to me about it."

But she'd set him talking, and he couldn't stop:

"That Miss Ames, she don't want a fuss. Little kid's hurt, and he's fallen down. But she decides no fuss should be made. So she calls no doctor to help the kid any. She calls you. I heard it was you who finally did call the doc. By then it was too late. I know what happened. I got it out of Sue. And if I didn't kill my lazy slob of a wife—"

Now Eve could see the bitter cruelty on his mouth.

"—let her live with her memories," he said. "But I'm going to

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kill that Ames woman, and I don't care what happens to me. No more, see? No more. I got this one thing to do, that's all. And I'll do it. I don't care too much what happens to you, either. So shut up, will ya?"

He seemed to think she was keeping the talk going. His voice rose to an ugly shrillness:

"She could have got the doctor to him, and she didn't do it. It was murder! Now she's gonna get a bullet in her, and nobody's going to call no doctor. So shut up."

Eve shut up. She could not, dared not, try to say that the boy was instantly dead. You couldn't contradict an obsession. So she sat in the half-dark, speechless.

What could she do about Mr. Johnson? He was a nice, genial chap. He might get a bullet, too. . . . "No, he won't. And I won't, either," her mind cried. "Not if I can help it." Courage came to her without having been called. This obsessed, sickhearted man must be outwitted, somehow. He mustn't kill anybody. She'd have to use everything she had, every brain cell, every ounce of self-control to prevent it.

"So they know?" the man demanded. "And now I gotta do it with the cops knowing?"

"They know," she said calmly.

"On the air, was it?" he said.

"Yes, it was."

He made a kind of animal grunt; then he pushed the button on the car radio. There was no news on. In a moment, music played. Eve found it strange to be sitting beside the man who intended to kill her, here in the soft dark, with music playing.

Then she saw the figure of a woman come out of the store and start to cross the road ahead of them. There was no mistaking that waddle or the chicken-stretch of the neck, forward, of those fat shoulders. It was Mrs. Peasley, a power in the PTA. She was already blinking and shielding her eyes from their headlights, and she was never one to walk past a parked car without peering in. Mrs. Peasley prided herself on remembering names, too. She'd say, "Good evening—Miss Ames, isn't it?" in her treacly voice.

Eve was paralyzed. She saw a vision of her own body tumbling out of Miss Connor's car, and the car careening in flight. She dismissed it. That wasn't going to happen. She refused to imagine it.

"Start the car," Mariot said in her ear. "Turn left. Get going."

Her hands and feet jumped to the controls. The car skittered past Mrs. Peasley, whipped in a left turn, and headed away from town back into the canyon.

"Easy now," Mariot said nervously. His mouth was so close to her shoulder, she could feel his breath. "Easy. There's a gas station coupla miles out this way, closed by now. Outside phone booth on the place. I don't see," he added

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with strange candor, "how I coulda kept the gun on you in the store without looking funny."

"How close was I to the bullet then?" thought Eve. But it wasn't a helpful thought, and she thrust it down.

"Besides," said Mariot savagely, "that Mis' Peasley knows me."

"She—knows you?"

"Nosy old bag was on my draft board," he said with pure exasperation.

A giggle came into Eve's throat, and she choked it down. Escaped by a hair's breadth. What looked like disaster had turned to temporary salvation. But she realized she couldn't afford to think back at all; she must think only forward. Well, then, she'd telephone, and no one would answer. After that she did not know, but it would give her a little time. And Mrs. Peasley might have seen something . . .

Geoffrey Taggart walked up the outside stairs in some haste and knocked at Eve's door. The door opened swiftly and a strong male hand yanked him inside.

"Who are you?" said Lieutenant Lord belligerently.

"Taggart's my name, friend of Miss Ames. She here?" said Geoffrey in his pleasant, cultivated voice.

"Didn't you tell me on the phone," said Lord, "you don't *know* where she's gone?"

"I didn't say that, exactly," said Geoffrey. "I simply knew I wanted a date and she said no."

He was a lean man, in his thirties. James Lord, with his hard-planed face, his matter-of-fact air, seemed stolid beside Geoffrey's high-strung slenderness.

"What made you think she was here, then? If you got any news, spit it out," said the lieutenant.

"I thought she might be washing her hair," blurted Geoffrey. "What I mean to say—"

"Well, she's not washing her hair *here*," drawled Lord. "You think of any other girl friends, for instance? Listen, Taggart; this girl's in bad trouble, and I mean bad." Lord's eyes were cool and steady.

Geoffrey winced. "I know. I'm worried. That's why I came."

The lieutenant had turned his back as if he had given up hoping for anything useful. Geoffrey said, "I know she's not with Frances Connor, just as I told you. But Eve may have gone to San Diego. She has relatives—"

"Who and what address?" The lieutenant turned.

"An Aunt Marie. That's all I—" Geoffrey's voice trailed off and he shrugged helplessly.

"This aunt's a blood relative? Married, is she?" The lieutenant was very quick and precise, and he asked for precision.

Geoffrey said, "I believe so."

"Then we don't have the name."

"Eve didn't say anything about going to San Diego. She may just

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be out having a bite," said Geoffrey. "After all, it's dinnertime."

"I hope so," the lieutenant said.

"This building is being watched, I suppose?"

"Yeah, it's being watched. That's right. If you want to wait here, keep quiet. Our man may be around here, now. If he hasn't got her already."

"But surely you—" Geoffrey sputtered.

"Surely, surely," said Lord, a little bleakly. "But he's on foot, he could slip through small places. Excuse me. Lie low till I come to let you out."

The lieutenant went out Eve's door and closed it. Geoffrey Taggart looked around, blinking. Eve's curtains were tightly drawn. The place was closed, airless, empty. Geoffrey sat down.

Outside, Lord walked without visible urgency around the corner. He stopped to light a cigarette, and spoke to a shadow in a slot between two houses: "No show?"

"Nope."

The lieutenant looked at the sky.

"Nice person, Miss Ames. My kid likes her fine."

"How could he have got her if we can't find her?" said the soft voice from the shadow.

"Maybe that's why we can't find her," said Lord. "What time is it?"

"6:55."

The lieutenant swore softly. . . .

In Eve's apartment, the telephone rang. Geoffrey Taggart, startled, stared at it a moment. He rose and took the telephone off the cradle gingerly. "Yes?"

"This is Frances Connor," a voice said rapidly.

"Oh, Frances," said Geoffrey with great relief. "Then you've heard! Where is Eve? Do you know? She isn't with you, is she?"

"No. Isn't she there?" The voice was strained.

Naturally, thought Geoffrey; his own voice showed strain, too. "No. Nobody knows where she is, at all. Where could she have gone?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Frances, do you know where this aunt of hers lives in San Diego?"

"No, I—"

"I thought perhaps she'd gone there. I knew she wasn't with you. Fool that I am, I came around hoping she'd decided to wash her hair. All females—" He remembered this was no time to be witty. "I wish I knew what I could do. The police think she may be in some restaurant." He was talking to a deadness on the line. "Where are you, Frances?"

"In a telephone booth at—" The voice stopped, and he, frowning, listened.

The voice seemed to return from far away: "You say the police are there?"

"Oh, yes. Not in the room, but they are watching. He's on foot and very slippery, they say. He may try to get in here. Are you alone, Frances?" Again he did not wait

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for an answer. "Will you be coming here? Maybe you and I could join forces."

"You think she'll be coming along, then?" the voice said.

"Can't be sure. We hope so."

"I may come."

"Good. Good."

"Goodbye, Adam," the voice said, suddenly louder and different. She hung up abruptly. Geoffrey hung up, frowning.

He put his hands in his pockets. *Adam.* It wasn't like Eve to have told Frances Connor that. If a man kids a bit with a girl named Eve and suggests that he may be her Adam some day, it's an intimacy. Not something to giggle over with a female confidante. Still, possibly Frances Connor was like a mother to her. Geoffrey tried to put the injury out of his mind. No time to be petty. Eve was in trouble—bad trouble, the lieutenant said.

There was nothing that he, Geoffrey, could think to do about it. The whole situation was so violent and so—strange. There seemed to be no way to take hold of the problem, to find her, save her. What could he—or, for that matter, the police—do but wait. He moved restlessly in the still, empty place.

Eve slammed the phone on its hook in case Geoffrey reacted to that "Adam" hint. She was jammed into the booth with a man and a gun. There had been a bad moment, after Mariot had put the dime in, when she, confident of getting no answer, had heard Geoffrey's voice. But now she was thankful; thankful that her own voice had been husky and strained, thankful Geoffrey had not given her away, thankful he'd said he knew she wasn't with Frances. Mariot should be all the more convinced that she *was* Frances.

And she was thankful to have been in touch with a friend on her side. Or had she been? Oh, Geoffrey must catch on! The name, Adam, would tell him plainly whom he had been talking to. But what good would it do when he did catch on? She hadn't been able to tell him anything very useful, with the gun sharp in her side, and Mariot's ear so close to her own that they were almost cheek to cheek.

She was glad to get out of that booth and into the air. The car was parked near the gas pumps, silent since Mariot had turned the music off. Nobody going by had paid any attention to it. Nor to the phone booth with its door held ajar so that the light stayed off. She and the man and the gun had been jammed together in semi-darkness and were now in semi-darkness walking close, shoulder to shoulder, back to the car. Traffic rolled by. No motorist looked away from the farthest reach of his headlights. Then they were in Frances Connor's car again, and

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the police—from what Geoffrey said—were looking for them both to be on foot.

Still, Eve was not afraid any more. She went docilely to the car and into the driver's seat, counting her chances. There was Frances, who would begin to fret and who would stir. There was Geoffrey, who would catch on. There was still Mrs. Peasley, and even perhaps Mr. Johnson, if he had happened to look up and see Miss Connor's car lurch so wildly by. A whole series of little points of contact that would connect, and sooner or later the police would know. Time was on her side. Eve sat quietly with her hands lightly resting on the wheel.

Mariot said, "I gotta get into her place." He was single-minded. Everything for him hung on one straight line. Within his purpose, he was shrewd and even cool.

"Why?" said Eve gently. "If she's not there?"

"I'll be waiting for her."

"The police are there."

"Nuts to the police. So it's a trap. I get her first, then who cares?" He shifted in the seat from side to side. "I gotta get past them just once, that's all. She got a garage?"

"She doesn't own a car."

"Every place has got some kind of garage," he said angrily.

"There is a garage," Eve admitted. "Her apartment is over a double garage."

"Yeah," he said with satisfaction. "Inside stairs?"

"There's a stairway." The door from the garage to her apartment was always locked for her protection. She didn't know whether to say so.

"Cars kept in the garage?" he demanded.

"One," she admitted.

"So you'll drive this one in there."

"I'd be stopped," she gasped.

"You'll yell out who you are. This guy thinks you're coming, don't he? You'll get by."

"It's impossible!" she protested. "What if the doors aren't open? What if—? No, it's impossible."

To her surprise, he saw the point she was making almost as if they were collaborators. "Okay. Then we hang around, parked some place nearby, and when she does come—"

Eve did not speak, but he seemed, to her alarm, to read what was in her mind.

"*You'll* know her," he said. "You know what she looks like."

"I?"

"And you'll tell me," he said. He was smiling cruelly.

"She might never come," said Eve faintly. "She may be in San Diego."

He said, "Get going."

So she started the car and drove toward town.

"What—" she began.

"Yeah?"

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It was an odd thing, but they did seem to be on the same side, now and again, chewing on the same problem. Perhaps it was because she had to fill her mind with something besides her own identity. She feared his intuition. She made herself try to follow what he was thinking.

"I was going to say," she told him, "what about the man who answered the phone?"

"Nuts to him," said Mariot.

Mariot wasn't afraid. He was beyond that. He brushed the idea of Geoffrey out of his mind. He had a gun. Then Geoffrey, she realized, would be in danger, too. She thought of Geoffrey's slender figure, his thin, intelligent face. Would he have brute courage to meet brute danger? Was there anything else? Was there any way she could reach past this man's dangerous despair?

"Mr. Mariot," she said musingly, "didn't you think your wife was hurt already? Didn't you think she was grieving?"

A shock of energy seemed to come into his body. "She'd better grieve," he said, and cursed monotonously for a while. They went along the canyon past Mr. Johnson's store, now closed and dark. "If she had got up out of the warm hay," he raved, "but not her! Not with me away! So the kid gets his own meal—what does she care?"

"Did she get up and cook when you left?" asked Eve a trifle tartly.

"Yeah, three o'clock," he snarled, "because I made her."

"Did you?" Eve thought. "But it isn't necessarily fatal to a nine-year-old to get his own meal for once. It wouldn't have been—except for *your* carelessness, and, oh, you know it!"

She didn't say anything.

"That don't rate her the whole morning in bed," he rasped. "She shoulda took care of the kid. She didn't do it. She didn't take care of the kid. And I *called* her—" His voice broke. "I even called her on the phone as soon as I got up there to Jasper's place. I seen I didn't have my little gun, so I called her, and it wasn't too late yet, Miss Connor. It wasn't too late."

"What time was it when you called her, Mr. Mariot?" said Eve softly.

"One o'clock, just after noon. Only one o'clock, that's what it was. And she says, sure, she's got everything under control. She was just getting out of the sack, see? But she didn't want me to know that. And it wasn't too late yet."

He drew a heavy, sobbing, anguished breath.

"But it was," Eve thought, "unhappy soul! It was already too late. And you know that, too."

"Boy, when this gets to me, did I let her have it. I let her have it, all right. I wished I'd killed her," he said tiredly.

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Eve had a vision, then, of his energy running out on him, and his crazy purpose with it. If the pressure would go. The more she could get him to talk, perhaps the more pressure would blow off.

"Maybe you *have* killed her," she said. "The radio said your wife was critically injured."

"Yeah?" He didn't seem to care.

Eve said wonderingly, "Isn't that enough?"

But he was shifting from side to side again in that desperate restlessness. "I went out with the guys. Hunting. I never even got the message till ten o'clock that night. We're in a joint, drinking a few beers. I went outa my head, Miss Connor."

"I can imagine," Eve said, and her voice trembled, her throat ached, she was so sorry for him.

"They tell me to rest," Mariot cried. "Who can rest? Twelve o'clock, midnight, I can't take no more. I start driving back."

"It's a long trip?"

"Ten hours."

"Ten hours there and ten hours back?" she said. "You must be tired."

"Yeah, tired, all right."

They seemed very close. He seemed to feel at least a little of her genuine sympathy.

"Isn't there a place you could sleep?" she suggested. "A few hours."

But he said solemnly, shockingly, "I'll sleep in my grave. Or in jail—it doesn't matter. Now step on it, Miss Connor," he said sternly. "We ain't getting there."

"I doubt if we'll make it," said Eve primly. "I'm afraid we're nearly out of gas."

"Hold up, then. Stop. Over there against the vacant lot." He was rough and peremptory. A fresh problem semeed to jolt and stimulate him.

Eve managed to get to the curb. They were under some trees. He leaned forward, staring at the gas gauge. One hand, his left, the one with the missing finger joint, groped on the seat behind him. He looked into her face, and his expression was full of cunning. She met his eyes dociley, innocently.

"Miss Connor," he said, "I don't trust you. You're making out to help me too much. Never mind, I figured how to keep the gun on you so you will anyway. Use this, and we can get some gas."

He held up the box of gauze and the adhesive tape that had been destined for Frances Connor's foot.

"Go on," he said. His right hand pointed the little gun straight at her. "Bandage it. The whole hand, the gun and all. It's going to look like a splint or something, but my little gun's going to be in there, and my finger on it. Though nobody's going to know it but you. And don't try pulling anything too tight now, or getting tricky, Miss Connor. Remember, I can get

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along by myself, probably. And this vacant lot would do for you."

They were well within the town, on a street of little shops, none open. And no movie theaters in this section; nothing to attract, no people walking.

Eve took the box of gauze, the tape.

"I can't trust you," he said, almost regretfully. "You're not going to help me kill Miss Ames. Nobody's going to help me, but I'm going to do it, just the same."

"I'm no nurse," said Eve tartly. "I'm probably going to make a clumsy mess of this."

He fell silent. The hand was as much like metal as the gun, hard and steady, while she began to bandage them both loosely over. Then, with his free hand, he turned the radio on, and hunted along the dial for news.

On KYOS the 7-o'clock spot news was almost over. The newscaster finished a sentence: . . . "nicely dressed, genteel-appearing." He took breath. "Anyone seeing a woman answering this description, contact Police. Repeat: Anyone knowing the whereabouts of Miss Eve Ames, please contact Police at once. And that's the news from your own station." Music swam in.

Mariot swore. "They woulda told me what she looked like!"

Eve, using both hands to tear off some tape and hide their trembling, said, with a nervous snap, "You should have gone to a PTA meeting once in a while."

She thought the sudden sound in his throat was close to laughter. She looked straight into his eyes. But they could hold no laughter. Never any more. In fact, they fell.

"Come on," he grumbled. "Don't be so fussy."

"It's after seven," Lord said. "You want to stay here or get out?"

Geoffrey stood up. "Miss Connor was driving in to meet me. I spoke to her on the phone. If there's anything the two of us could do—"

"What kind of car does she drive?"

"Two-door sedan." He knew the make but not the year. "Dark blue."

"Okay, she'll hit the roadblock. We're stopping every living soul who tries to get into this block."

"Is there any point in my staying here?" said Geoffrey. "Is there anything at all that I can do?"

"I dunno what," said Lord, not without sympathy.

"I've got to get out of here," muttered Geoffrey.

"Okay, just go down the stairs, quick, and without any commotion. Drive away to the north. They'll let you out that way."

"Yes. You don't mind if I circle back? I ought to meet Miss Connor. She's taking a long time."

"Go ahead. Circle back," said Lord wearily.

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"I'm going out of my mind," Geoffrey admitted. "I feel so helpless. Thing like this—I suppose we have to leave it up to you professionals. Will you be frank with me? How much hope have you?"

"Do our job if we can," the lieutenant said.

When he had watched Geoffrey to his car, the lieutenant stepped back from the window. He rubbed the back of his neck. Do his job. Sure. But that didn't guarantee success. Crazy man would try to come here, wouldn't he? Should the lieutenant put it on the air that Miss Ames was at home? Or would that be too obvious?

Where the deuce was the girl? Nice girl. He'd guarantee there wasn't a woman walking down a street in this town who hadn't been checked out. But if she was scared and safe and hiding some place, why didn't she let them know? Somehow, the lieutenant thought she would have let them know. He didn't think she was so safe. Unless she *had* gone to San Diego. But he couldn't call everybody named Marie in San Diego. And even from down there, Miss Ames should have heard, should have called . . .

With her heart in her mouth, Eve drove into the gas station and pulled up handy to the pump. The attendant looked in. She swallowed. He was no one she knew.

But was he one who had heard her description on the air? She'd been casting up her chances either way. The local station, the children's hours—how many adults would have been listening? And was all this detail on a national network? She thought not. Rather, hoped not, in fact. Because if the attendant were to say, "Aren't you that teacher they're looking for?" she hadn't much doubt the gun would go off.

Of course, if the man had any control and recognized Mariot, too, he wouldn't say this. But Mariot's mutilated hand had the fingers all curled inward. Mariot was sitting quietly with his bandaged right hand resting on his left forearm. He was utterly concentrated and tense. The gun was in a perfect position to hurt her cruelly.

The attendant said cheerfully, "Fill 'er up?"

"Please."

The attendant went around to the rear of the car.

"You pay him," Mariot growled. He mustn't show his hand.

Eve picked her purse off the seat between them. In her wallet, she realized suddenly, was her death warrant: her identification, her driver's license.

She opened the wallet flat, turning the edge up, with the license, in its plastic slot, away from the man. She slipped a ten-dollar bill out, closed the wallet nervously,

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dropped it in her lap, and sat twiddling the money. If Mariot had had the use of both hands, he might long ago have rooted about in her purse. . . . No "if's," Eve! No shuddering over old risks past.

How could she use her name and address to communicate? Show it to the attendant? He might not see any significance. He might see too much. She couldn't risk it. She had no card to say Mariot was a killer, with a gun. Let the wallet fall out, then? Leave it behind? No, not here. The attendant would see it too soon and come crying after them.

"Check your oil, folks?"

"Never mind it," Mariot said. He was as tense and hard as metal. "Skip the windshield, too."

"Whatever you say, folks."

Eve gave over the bill.

As the attendant made change, he said cheerfully to Mariot, "Hurt your hand?"

"Broke it," Mariot said.

"Hey, tough!"

"Yeah."

Eve took the change and dropped it loose into her bag, her hands quick and nervous.

"Okay, let's go," said Mariot in a low voice.

She started the motor. The bag slipped off her right thigh and lay between them again, but the wallet was still in her lap, hidden by the edges of her coat.

The car moved. Just as its nose was half out from the canopy, Eve lifted her foot from the accelerator, for she saw Geoffrey Taggart. He was in his black convertible heading out into the canyon, driving fast. The whole pose of his body proclaimed his state of urgency. He was looking for her, of course. He didn't see her. She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry.

"What's wrong?" Mariot said. He was so concentrated, tuned so close to her thoughts.

Eve fogged her own mind and forgot about Geoffrey. "I wish you'd turn your bandaged hand," she wailed. "Look; I'm n-nervous. My foot slipped."

Mariot made no response at all. The car moved. Then she was at the sidewalk, forced to wait for an opening in traffic.

"That gas-station man," she said, with her eyes on the rear-view mirror, "is looking after us."

Mariot had to cast a look behind. She rammed the wallet down between the door panel and the seat cushion.

"My coat's caught in the door," she said irritably. "It's driving me crazy."

"Yeah," said Mariot, snapping his head back suspiciously. "You better not think about getting out of this car. Not now. Watch it."

"If I could free my coat," she said quietly. "Please."

"We're just about four blocks from where we're going, and that's where we're going, and I need you."

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"Please." She lifted both hands from the wheel.

"All right, quick. The light's changing, and you can turn out into the street."

She took her foot off the brake. The car rolled a little. She opened the door with her left hand, and yanked at her coat skirt with her right. The wallet fell out on the sidewalk. She slammed the door quickly shut, grabbed the wheel, and turned out fast to the right, throwing her passenger with the violence of the turn.

"Break my neck!" he growled. "Woman driver. Now, listen."

Eve didn't pay any attention. She was reckoning chances.

Geoffrey was going to Frances, so he would find out soon that she was in Frances's car. And the police would have that information. So this car would be—what was it called? Hot. And her wallet would be found and would place her in town. All this was good—so she nervously hoped.

What, in the meantime, was going to happen when they neared her apartment, she could not foresee. If, indeed, she managed to run the car into the garage, and Mariot found himself trapped with no exit.

She thought, "No. It wouldn't be feasible. We'll park somewhere in the dark and wait and watch for Eve Ames to come walking along. We never will see her. That's all."

"Turn right," Mariot said.

She obeyed, waiting for a pedestrian quite helplessly. Nobody looked at a driver's face in the dark. The units were automobiles, not people; headlights were eyes, and hoods were noses. "What's that car going to do?" you said to yourself.

She made the turn. They climbed a little, going north on a street a block in from the main highway. Her apartment was only three blocks off.

"Listen to me," Mariot said urgently. "Make a smooth turn to the next left, and run into the parking lot behind that diner on the highway."

"What?"

"*Do it.* Cops!"

Eve did it.

As she did, she caught a glimpse under the street lights of two police cars drawn up ahead of them so as to narrow the street. At the same time, her automatic glance into the mirror, as she turned, showed her a motorcycle cop who was immediately behind them. He remained in that position. He also turned.

Eve kept to the right, driving slowly and cautiously. The cop was in no hurry and did not pass. She couldn't imagine how the cop could get to the gun or even realize where it was, all in a flash. She simply tried not to think about it.

"Turn into the lot," said Mariot. He knew the cop was there.

Eve swung right over the sidewalk into the parking space behind the diner. Mariot directed her to a

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spot in the farthest corner against a high fence. Eve found herself shaking as the motor died. The cop had turned in after them.

Mariot put his left arm up on the seat back, and then around her shoulders. He drew her close. The gun, hard under the gauze, rammed into her ribs painfully. Mariot's rough face rasped on hers, his left hand kept her head from recoiling.

The cycle cop trundled slowly along the perimeter of the lot. He was leaving to his right, and he peered past them as if looking for holes in the fence. To their silhouetted embrace, he paid no heed. Then he was beyond them, inspecting the recesses under the legs of the billboard at the highway's margin. In a very short time, he was gone.

Frances Connor's car wasn't "hot" yet.

Eve felt exhausted. She lay relaxed, her cheek against her killer's chin. His body became less hard, the gun less painful. For a space of two minutes, they were propped against each other in a spent heap, and it was peaceful.

"It's just too much," thought Eve. "I'm tired out—and so must *he* be! He'll have to give it up. I'll just lie here like this until it's over." . . .

Back at the gas station, a man waiting for his tires to be checked sauntered casually into the exit lane. He picked up Eve's wallet, did not look at it. It went into his pocket.

When the car was ready, he drove off. He was alone. He hit the red light at the coast highway. Waiting there, he opened the wallet and took the money out. It wasn't much. A five and three ones. He shrugged, and stuffed the bills into his coat. The light changed, and he turned south. As he ran out of town, he tossed the rifled wallet out of his car.

Geoffrey Taggart's jaws ached from tension. *Adam!* Too late, he perceived the possible significance of that word. Could it have been Eve, herself, on the telephone? He no longer believed it was Frances Connor. He had not met her on the road. She was not driving to meet him. Too much time had gone by. So he was hurrying to Frances's house.

He raced along the canyon road. He sent the car zooming up the hill, and as he reached the flat upper end of the road, his headlights illuminated Frances Connor, her coat thrown around her like a cloak, hobbling along in the ruts. He braked.

"Geoffrey! It's about time. She's all right, is she?"

"Nobody knows, Frances." He was out and supporting her, his heart in his boots. "What's happened to you?"

Frances said, "Scraped my foot. It's nothing. What do you mean, nobody's found her? She left here

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more than an hour ago. I thought she'd sent you to let me know."

"Left here? Eve!"

"Why, yes. We heard the radio. She went to call the police."

"Then *she* called me." Geoffrey felt sick.

"Called *you?* Where was she? What did she say?"

"I didn't recognize her voice. Frances, for some reason she pretended to be you."

He gave her the substance of that phone call. All but the word "Adam." That he couldn't tell; he felt too sick with guilt about it. But he hadn't been prepared for cryptic signals, for deadly masquerade.

"It must have been Eve," Frances said in bewilderment when he'd finished.

"But why did she lie to me?" said Geoffrey, irritable with the strain. "And if she was at a phone, why didn't she call the police? What's happening to her?"

Frances said, "I don't understand it, either. But we're wasting time."

"She hasn't called the police." He went on worrying at it. "They hadn't heard anything. Why should she—?"

Frances said, "Help me into your car, and turn it around."

Geoffrey turned the car. "I had understood," he said, a trifle sadly, "that she *wasn't* coming here." This hurt. Eve, for some reason, had left him out.

"Doesn't matter," murmured Frances Connor. "I'm just afraid she ran into Mariot. Let's go down to the grocery store."

"It's closed."

"Then we'll rouse Mr. Johnson."

Geoffrey's imagination suddenly came up with an explanation: "Frances, what if this Mariot was in the grocery store when she got there? What if she didn't dare give her own name—or be heard calling the police?" . . . "Then you failed her," his own mind answered, inexorably.

"In that case, we may not be able to rouse Mr. Johnson," said Frances grimly, "or Eve, either. Sorry." She glanced at his set face. "Let's hurry."

The little store was shut and silent, and the door was locked. Frances Connor shouted, and someone stirred in the upstairs apartment.

"Mr. Johnson? Come down here."

"What's the matter?"

She wouldn't say, so he came. Lights went up, and he opened the store.

No, Miss Ames had not been in, but he'd seen her in Miss Connor's car. "She went back up the canyon, in a hurry, too. I saw her turn. Made me wonder."

"What on earth? *Up* the canyon?"

"That's right, Miss Connor."

"Tell him what's wrong," said Frances to Geoffrey, who stood appalled, "while I get the police."

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She put a coin in the phone. Her heart was jumping.

Geoffrey stuttered out the news, and the grocer said, shocked, "She wasn't alone in the car. I don't know who it was. I couldn't see. A man, I think. *Somebody* was with her."

"Police?" said Frances Connor into the phone. "Have you found Miss Eve Ames yet?"

"No, ma'am," said a weary voice.

"She's in my car."

"Wait a minute!"

A different voice came on: "Lieutenant Lord speaking. Who is this calling?"

"Frances Connor, principal of Jefferson School. Eve Ames left my house, at 115 Plum Terrace, over an hour ago, in my car. She was going to call you from this grocery store. The grocer says he saw her turn up the canyon, and that somebody was with her."

"Can he describe the person?"

"No. He believes it was a man."

"They didn't go up the canyon far," Lord said. "Her wallet was just picked up south of town on the coast highway. There was no money in it. Rifled, probably."

Frances breathed in hard. "What does that mean?"

"Don't know. Nothing good."

"She may have tried—" said Frances. "Some woman called Mr. Taggart and gave my name. It wasn't I."

"When was this? Where did he take the call?"

"At her apartment."

"What did she say? He didn't tell me." His voice was curt with exasperation.

Frances explained.

"She said she was going to her apartment?" said Lord. "I don't get it."

"There's been time," said Frances feebly.

The lieutenant said sharply, "Give me a description of your car."

Frances did so, crisply.

"Thanks," said Lord. "It's a pleasure to talk to you. What was Miss Ames wearing?"

"Her brown topcoat, no hat, dark-green wool dress, brown pumps, brown handbag."

Lord said, "Hang on." After a full minute his voice came back on the line. "I was told she was *not* with you," he said rather severely.

"Lieutenant—she told a social lie," said Frances.

"I understand," he said, somewhat grimly. "Thank you, Miss Connor. We'll do all we can." He hung up.

"A social lie," said Geoffrey. He was trembling. "Eve didn't want me around. That's why— Where is she now?"

Frances touched him. "We'll look for her everywhere," she said gently. . . .

"So," said the officer beside the lieutenant, "maybe she takes off for San Diego alone in a panic. But

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why does she lie to Taggart? Why would she throw her empty wallet away? And if she wasn't alone, who took her? Mariot?"

"Maybe Mariot was in earshot when she made that call. She was going to try to get to her apartment, but in the meantime he got her."

"And he went south alone," said the other man.

"So we look for a body in a brown topcoat, maybe up the canyon."

"Pretty dark up there," the other one said.

"She was—quite pretty," said Lord, fiddling with a pencil. "I used to talk to her at PTA, about my kid, Terry."

"*You* go to PTA meetings, Lieutenant?"

"Have to," the lieutenant said, "since Alice died." He rose. "Better call some of the men off that apartment."

"How many, Lieutenant?"

"Leave enough to cover," said Lord abruptly. "Leave plenty to cover."

"You think maybe Mariot *didn't* get her?"

Lord said, "I got the distinct idea from his wife that he wasn't interested in getting away safe."

"Get the teacher and then commit suicide, huh? Or give himself up? That's what you mean?"

"The guy's got nothing to live for," said Lord, "so you tell me why he wants her money."

Back at the diner in the far reaches of the parking lot, cars came and went, but in fewer numbers all the time. The dinner rush was waning. One car stayed, and the couple inside had not moved much.

Eve embraced the steering wheel, with her head lying upon her arms. To the left, the rush of cars on the coast highway was constant. Yet here, in the back corner of the parking lot, was absolute quiet. The man beside her was motionless and remote. He might even have fallen asleep. She wondered if he had, and what chance this would give her. To move, to open the door, to click the handle and slide out seemed an enormous project.

"Mr. Mariot," she said very quietly at last.

"Yeah?" He hadn't been asleep.

"Why don't you take the car and go? Go to Los Angeles. They won't find you. I won't say—"

"They'll find me," he said listlessly. "That's okay." He wasn't interested.

"Mr. Mariot." She tried another another tack: "Wouldn't you like to know about your wife? Wouldn't you like to call the hospital? Or let me?"

"Why?" he said.

"Because if she isn't dead, if she's better, then—"

He began to shift restlessly again.

"I was trying to think of some way out for you," she said.

He didn't speak.

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"What's good about revenge," said Eve musingly, "when you get to it? I have often wondered. You don't feel good, do you, because you hurt your wife?"

"Yes, I do," he said childishly.

"And after you kill Miss Ames," said Eve slowly. She let her voice go very flat. "So what? She'll only be—dead."

"Now," he said, almost with pity, "don't do that. You been pretty good, Miss Connor. You don't want to start trying to talk me out of it."

"I wish I could," she said forlornly.

"You been pretty good," he repeated. "Sue said you was a right nice lady, and I guess that's so."

"Have I done it?" thought Eve, galvanized. "Have I touched him? Does compassion work? Will it save me? And him, too?" She felt a moment of exultance and awe. Here, in the quiet, had all his pressures gone? Did he know that she was essentially on his side?

Mariot said, "I guess you're pretty well thought of in this town."

"Please—" She lifted her head, and she was smiling, although tears were in her eyes.

"So I can use you for a shield, all right," said the man with the gun. "No cop's gonna want to hurt you."

Her heart made sick circles downward.

"I'm thinking we could get out of the car and walk up the street, and when we get to the cops, I can keep you between me and them, and probably I'd get through. Trouble is—" he said.

"Trouble?" said Eve, a trifle cynically and sarcastically.

"I don't know she's there yet." He turned his head impatiently. "She wouldn't be in that diner, would she?"

"No," said Eve stonily.

It was the truth. The diner was a greasy-spoon type, strictly for the transients on the coast highway. She'd never been inside. But—oh, why hadn't she lied, and said "Maybe"? Some human being inside that diner might help her.

Mariot was looking at the time.

"Well?" said Eve, suddenly willing for anything but this. "What are you waiting for?"

"Waiting for the 7:30 news," he said.

"The news! That's stupid," she said recklessly. "Do you think they're going to tell you where she is? So you can get her?"

"They'll say if they don't know where she is yet," he informed her patiently, "and that'll tell me she ain't home, won't it? Or maybe they'll say if she is in San Diego. Coupla minutes." He punched the button. A program was ending with a commercial.

But Eve's mind had fled his problem in panic. They *didn't* know where she was. Nobody knew. Therefore the description,

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her description, would be repeated. And even if, by remote chance, Mariot's tortured mind didn't connect it with her, there was something else. Frances and Geoffrey were together by now. It would be said on the air that she, Eve Ames, was in this car! That would penetrate! That would tear it! Then he'd know!

"I wish I had a cup of coffee," she said loudly over the radio's jabber. "They're not going to tell you where she is." Her voice went on without conscious urging from her brain: "But I can find out for you whether she is in San Diego. Listen." Boldly she pushed the Off button on the radio and turned to face him. "I remember."

"Yeah?"

She could see that he was blinking as if to clear fatigue from his eyes.

"I remember her aunt's name and address. That's all you need to call Long Distance."

"Yeah?" he said rather feebly. "So what?"

"So Miss Ames could be down there. I can call up her aunt and find out."

"Where can you call from?" he said almost mechanically.

"From the diner."

He was thinking, slowly perhaps, but craftily. She could sense that.

"And if she is in San Diego," said Eve, with a note of triumph, "you couldn't get her, could you?"

"Why not?" he said, immediately and truculently. "This car can get as far as San Diego, can't it? In a coupla hours."

He rubbed his chin with his left hand. The stub of his index finger lingered along his lips.

"You don't have to be afraid," she said hastily, "to go into the diner. Why can't I bandage that finger tip, too? Then nobody would know. *You* could use a cup of coffee, by the way," she said rather crossly.

"Yeah, do that," he said suddenly, and held out his left forefinger.

She went to work eagerly. So long as she worked on his left hand and his right was bound to the gun, he couldn't turn the radio on. But if he commanded her to turn it on, how could she avoid it?

"I hope she *is* in San Diego, you know," she babbled. "And, poor thing, she was so terribly upset, that may be exactly where she's gone. Naturally, a person would go to the family. You keep calling her my friend, I know, but a friend is never so close as family."

"It'll do," he said.

"Wait," she said, thinking he meant the bandage. "It needs more tape than that."

She could see, now that his left hand hung free, how it was shaking.

"Mr. Mariot," said Eve, putting both her hands around his trembling one, daring at last to try, "there's only one thing I wish you

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knew." She tried to push out sympathy, tried, with her heart bursting, just to reach him. "We *loved* the little boy," she said. "Nobody meant him to die. Not anyone."

"Shut up!" He was hot with anger again. The sore spot was too raw. She shouldn't have tried to touch it.

"You talk about revenge," he said bitterly, "and you said, yourself, 'So she'll only be dead.' I said that, too. *I'm* going to die. In one hour. Two. And it's nothing. So maybe Miss Ames ought to live with her memories. Like my wife."

She sighed a long, shuddering sigh.

"All right," Mariot went on, "we go in the diner, we have a cup of coffee, and you call up this aunt. But if she's in San Diego," he said, "it's a long haul. And, like you said, I'm tired. And *you'll do.*"

"I?"

"You're her friend," he said. "She'll feel bad. She'll know what grieving is!"

Eve was holding his hand, still. She simply stared at him.

"And maybe that's good enough," he said, snatching his left hand backward. "Now get out. Move!"

Now he sounded rushed and confused. "If she's not in San Diego, we'll do what I said. Start up the street. I'd rather get to her in a way, but if I don't—" His mouth was cruel. "I'd like to think there's some chance she's watching, that she'll see you get it —just like she watched Danny die."

She could feel the tide flow into him. The death of the child, that unspeakable outrage, was the wellspring of his anger and his energy.

Eve saw through his mind that she was not supposed to be a person, but a counter or a symbol. But she said quietly, because she had to try it, and she might not have another chance, "Danny died instantly. There was nothing anyone could do."

"Don't lie to me!" he yelled. "Don't give me that cover-up! Shut up!"

Eve waited quietly, convinced she was about to receive however many bullets were in the little gun.

Then he said furiously, *"Move!"*

So she moved, getting out of the car. But she thought, "He doesn't want to kill me, not really. He's confused, he's wavering. If I am quiet, plain weariness and despair may stop him in time."

She, herself, did not despair. There was the car; someone might see it. There was her wallet; they'd be looking for her in town. There would be people in the diner; she might be recognized by one of them. The man's bandaged hands would attract attention, too. Injury to both hands was a bit odd, and he could be recognized as soon as she. The police were not far, only two blocks up, one over. If anyone suspected, they could be called very quickly. And finally—when the lit-

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tle gun went off, it might not kill her.

So she had hope. She'd keep hope. And, by sheer hope, she might wear him out.

The low diner sat cater-cornered on the lot. They walked around to the entrance. Eve was sure that whatever happened to break her strange captivity would happen very fast, like an explosion. She braced herself as best she could. She knew Mariot glanced at her face almost with curiosity. He batted the door open with an elbow. They were in the light.

The air in this place was heavy with smoke and food odors. There was no one sitting at the counter, no one in any of the small booths along the wall. No customer at all. The counterman was reading the sports section of a newspaper. He looked up at them with no particular welcome. No recognition lit his gaze. He showed no curiosity and no alarm.

Frances Connor said to Geoffrey, "Don't drive so fast."

"This is no good," said Geoffrey in despair. "I'm afraid it's a police job, Frances."

"I know my car better than they possibly can," the woman said.

"We ought to be near a phone."

"Turn up here, Geoffrey, and slowly, please. It's quite dark under those trees."

"We really ought to stay by a telephone," he insisted.

"What can a telephone do for us?" said Frances bluntly. "I don't insist on being the first to hear she's safe—just so she is safe."

"Don't say that." He ground his teeth.

Neither of them had enjoyed their ride out into the canyon, where beside any fence post, horror might hide against the ground. Horror might wait in the car, for all they knew, parked, abandoned.

"The police, with their prowl cars and their wireless communications," said Geoffrey bitterly. "That's what we depend on. It's futile for you and me—mild people, kind, well-meaning people, to be creeping about the town, peering into shadows on dark streets."

"It would be helpful," said Frances grimly, "if I could spot my car."

"Your car may be a hundred miles away."

"True."

He licked his dry lower lip. "Shouldn't we face it, Frances? There's no defense against uncontrolled violence. What chance has a delicate girl like Eve against a madman with a gun?"

"Maybe she's tougher than you think," said Frances angrily. "And we do not know, yet, that there is no hope."

"We're kidding ourselves," said Geoffrey, painfully.

Eve meant to look around the diner for a telephone, but Mariot

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had his left hand under her right elbow and his hard fingers compelled her to the counter. They sat up to it, he on her right, and the gun came to rest in the crook of his left arm. She could feel the line the bullet would take across the little space between them.

"What'll it be?" said the counterman. He was looking at that bandaged hand.

"Just coffee," said Mariot briskly. "Black for me. You?"

"Black," Eve said faintly.

The counterman turned to reach for cups. "Bust your hand, fella?" he said cheerfully. "Howja do it?"

"Fell," Mariot said in a tone of disgust. "Darned near busted the both of them."

Now he moved his left hand, and the bandaged finger was revealed.

The counterman's brows sailed up obligingly.

Eve could tell that a cook or some person in white was in the diner's kitchen. A middle patch of him was visible by way of the low-arched, counter-high opening through which food could pass. His head, however, was high. Estimating angles, she judged that he could see only the inner edge of the counter, if as much. Not her. Not Mariot.

The counterman set thick cups before them. Eve looked sideways at Mariot's face. It was the first time she'd seen it in full light. He had thick lashes that concealed his eyes. His whole face had a gaunt, drained look now, almost a look of peace. He took the mug up clumsily in his left hand.

"Pretty slow, this time of night," he said, and there was something pathetic in this commonplace. He was on vacation from tension, on detour from his drive to his own destruction. She felt a pang of pity and a pang of hope. Sometimes an assumed attitude solidifies and becomes a real one. As a forced smile in a fit of blues starts the low mood swinging away.

"Never can tell," said the counterman amiably. "You just driving through?"

Mariot shrugged.

"Piece of pie to go wid?"

"No, thanks."

Eve tasted the hot liquid. It was comforting. She thought that for Mariot it would be relaxing. Also, it was ordinary, a detail of daily life, a little pointer back.

"Shall I phone?" she asked easily.

"Wait a while," he answered. "I was trying to figure."

The counterman took this for ordinary private talk and removed himself to a polite distance.

"When did you last see her?" asked Mariot in a low voice.

For a bewildered moment Eve couldn't think whom he meant. "Oh," she said, "you mean Miss—"

"Yeah." He cut her off. "When?"

"I guess it was this morning."

"She say anything about San Diego?"

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"No, but if she's not in town—" Eve fumbled.

"How'd she go? You say she's got no car. She go on the bus?"

"I guess so."

"What I'm trying to figure is if she's had time—"

"To get there? Plenty of time, I should think," Eve said absently. "All day."

She had to figure what she might accomplish with the phone call. Aunt Marie might recognize her voice, and give everything away. Or she could call a wrong number and gain time. But what good would time do?

The counterman was immersed in the sport pages of his paper. He wasn't paying any attention to them. There must be someone.

Then, through the opening to the kitchen, Eve saw a face, and her heart jumped. It was a face at the level of the counter, chin just high enough to reach. There was a child in there. A little boy. And he was watching her!

Eve picked up her coffee and scalded her mouth with a swallow. "Oof!" she said. "Oh, dear." She'd spilled some.

Mariot's eyes were sharp upon her. She could feel him tensing. She knew he was looking around to see what had startled her, and then he saw. A little boy!

His whole body took the shock. He, too, gulped coffee and spilled some. He put the cup down. "We better get out of here," he said.

Eve was trying to think. She had seen this child. He was not one of her fourth-graders, but he had seen her on the playground. He must have. But did he know her name? And had he listened to Grif Griffin tonight and left the news on? Maybe not the news, because the small face was watching without much expression. But most probably he knew Grif Griffin. And Grif Griffin had signals! All the kids knew the signals.

Mariot said harshly, "Drink the coffee, and we'll get out of here."

"You don't want me to phone at all," said Eve in a fluster.

"No. No good," he growled.

She saw his haunted eyes glance toward the child's face. Then his head began to shift from side to side, evading, denying. He began to talk to her rapidly and low, looking at the counter.

"A call would just tip her off, I'm saying she's *there*. In San Diego. What you said about the family, I think you got it. So we'll go to San Diego."

"But—"

"Okay," he said in that rapid undertone. "She hadn't been found here, half an hour ago. And she shoulda been, if she's in town. Even if she is," he added, "the cops aren't going to put her in the apartment."

Eve swallowed. She thought, "That's true."

"But you got her aunt's name and address," Mariot said, "and

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nobody else has! We can make it. And she won't be expecting me, in San Diego." Mariot ground his teeth. "I want to see her. *She's* the one got it coming. Make it snappy," he said angrily.

Eve thought, "He was ready to kill me—this me—just a few minutes ago. Now he won't deprive me of my cup of coffee."

She thought she couldn't go out on the open highway with this man, couldn't keep this up much longer. How much more time in this diner? A minute? Seconds, anyhow.

Then, what signal could she give to the one human being who was aware of her at all, the child? She couldn't remember Grif Griffin's signals. Now, of all times, the whole code she had thought she knew fairly well, fled completely out of her memory. She grasped at only one. The one she'd so recently spoken of to Miss Connor. To tap your teeth meant, "I have news."

Eve put her cup down and, as if she were nervous, made a grimace that bared her teeth, put up her right hand, clicked the thumbnail.

"Too hot," she murmured, not daring to look at the child.

Mariot didn't move. He did not dare look at the child, either. A little boy. Just Danny's age. Mariot was staring at the counter. It gave Eve a chance.

But she couldn't remember any more of Grif Griffin's signals. There had been something to do with danger, on the air just tonight. What meant danger in Grif Griffin's code? She simply did not know. And her seconds were going by.

She glanced up at the boy and she put both hands flat, palm to palm, fingers pointing upward. It wasn't Grif Griffin's code. It was only an ancient human signal. It meant prayer. It meant, "Help me." Would the modern child, for he was watching her with great interest now, understand this classic signal? Was this a child who had ever prayed?

Eve couldn't tell whether he recognized any message. She broke her hands apart and seized the cup again. Drinking, she curled up her left hand, and held the fist it made beside her left ear. *Telephone, little boy! Telephone somebody! Tell!* Suppose he'd never heard of prayer. Certainly he knew about the telephone.

But she dared not glance at him again. She, too, stared at the counter. They must look, she thought, like two miserable sinners, staring sightlessly down, side by side.

Mariot said, "I can't wait here no longer."

She looked up, and the child was gone.

The little boy's name was Gino. He left the diner by the back. No use trying to talk to his uncle, the cook there. Uncle Joe was kinda crabby; he worked too hard, Pa

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said. But Gino lived in a house on the side street just two doors beyond the parking lot, and his father was in the front yard looking at his ruffled petunias along the entrance walk by a band of light that streamed out the house door.

"Pa, something's the matter."

"Hi, kid, 'bout time you came in. I was looking around for you."

"Pa, there's one of the teachers from my school in the diner with a man, Pa. And she needs somebody to help her."

"Whatcha talking, kid?" The father rumpled the child's black hair affectionately.

"It's a teacher, Pa, honest." Gino hopped. "Look—she did like this, Pa. Look."

"Ah, you're dreamin' something up, as usual. Better get inside."

"No, Pa," Gino said, in such a voice that the father reached and pulled the boy forward until his solemn face was in the light.

"What is this?" he said, half kidding, half seriously.

"She was meaning me to notice," Gino said. "I *know* she was." He couldn't explain all about Grif Griffin in two minutes. He couldn't go into that.

"Pa!" he cried. "I think the man musta had a gun on her."

"Ah, Gino." The man relaxed. His white teeth showed in laughter.

"Pa, if we don't do something, and something bad happens . . . Huh, Pa?"

The father felt of the young shoulder, and it was trembling, so he considered. The kid was serious, never mind what the truth was. And to the kid, he, the father, was strength, was help, was wisdom. He didn't want to laugh the kid off too fast. A kid should come to his father. Who else? he thought proudly.

So, for the kid's sake, he said, "I'll take a walk down there, okay?' and heard the sigh of faith triumphant.

Then, the boy's hand was pulling his cuff. "Pa, if he's got a gun, you wanta call the cops, maybe? I think she wants us to call the cops. And, anyhow, you don't want to get hurt, Pa."

The father saw the love in his boy's eyes. "We'll take a look before I go calling any cops, kid," he said. "Maybe it's nothing. You didn't *see* a gun, did you?'

Gino said honestly, "No." They were walking in the street now and, ahead, the diner shone. The parking lot was practically empty. Not many in there. The father was thinking, "Crazy ideas, kids get, but I'll talk to Joe a coupla minutes, kid'll be satisfied."

He was a stocky, tough-muscled, but peaceful man. He walked in dignity, as wisdom should, not hurrying . . .

Mariot paid for the coffee and turned Eve off her stool with his left hand on her right elbow. He slid around to be on her right. She

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would not be out of the power of the gun. That power was real, she conceded.

Real, too, was a breaking in Mariot. He could stand no long drive to San Diego. The sight of the boy, perhaps, had poised his great guilt ready to fall on him and smash him. Even though he denied it, he must know it was there. He could hold it off only by violence. Somewhere out on the highway, he would break. He would either go to pieces or go violent. And the violence would fall on her, even if, in his mind, she was only second best. They must not get away.

She opened the diner door herself, helpless to do otherwise. They stepped outside. She saw the two figures on the sidewalk, a man and a boy. She thought Mariot might have seen them, too, because he raked her shoulder blade with the gun.

"Get to the car," he said harshly.

Now he was in a tearing hurry. She took quick, short steps and stumbled a little.

The father stood still, pressing his hands protectively upon the boy.

"They're getting away," Gino said.

"Quiet," the father said.

The father watched this couple go in what certainly looked like guilty flight, the girl stumbling, the man too close in an odd way, across the pavement of the lot. Saw them reach a car. Now he was worried. It wasn't enough suspicion to call the cops on. But it looked funny, all right. The father owed his child wisdom, and what was wise?

"Start up," Mariot said. "Come on; get out of here."

Eve, sliding under the wheel, knew that the boy *did* understand! (Oh, wonderful little boy!) Now she had hope, and someone suspicious. She thought, "I can't leave here in the car, can't be lost again. Let it be now. If he is going to use the gun on me, let it be here! He could have done it already a hundred times. He didn't. He hasn't yet." So she put her will and her wits against his will that they should depart.

Headlights slashed into this dark end of the lot as a car rolled up over the sidewalk, coming in from the street.

"Out the way we come," said Mariot. "Side street. Can't make a left turn into the coast road."

Eve had the motor running. She backed up; her head was turned over her shoulder. She knew that Mariot's head turned, too, in reflex. Then she was ready to go forward. She should wait for this car, which was coming toward them, to let it by. But her left hand darted under the dash and yanked on the hood-release. At the same time she stepped hard on the accelerator. The car jumped. Mariot was jerked in the seat. The hood flew up as the car leaped. The front of the car gaped like an alligator.

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Mariot yelled. Around the open hood, Eve couldn't see. Nor could Mariot. So Eve, with a bit of nice, blind calculation, hit, with a glancing, fender-crushing blow, the incoming car.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she cried. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!'

Her skin crawled. Her very bones cringed together. Mariot might shoot. Or he might only slip harmlessly out his side and run away free into the shadows. She wished . . .

He did neither. His hard fingers on that left hand dug into her thigh, and the gun was steady, pointing at her heart. His forehead looked dampish. His eyes were strained and startled in the sockets.

But he said, "Take it easy; I'll talk. Don't worry. We'll get away."

Eve thought, bewildered, "Doesn't he know I opened the hood?"

Mariot didn't seem to know. He seemed to accept an accident that had happened to them both. He was ready to drop with fatigue, of course. Only his purpose could hold him up.

Out of the tail of Eve's eye, she saw the man and the boy pass the corner of the diner. They had not come, as naturally they would have come, to size up the little collision. Instead, they had gone into the diner. So she had hope.

The driver of the other car was at her left, saying the usual: "Look what you're doing, why can't you?" He had a round, smooth face. His pudgy mouth was prim with indignation.

"Nobody's fault the hood's loose," Mariot said. "Take it easy. Not much damage, is there?"

The man walked and put one foot on his front bumper and stood on it. Something jarred free.

"It's nothing much, is it?" Mariot called, "Say, shut that hood down, wouldja, mister?"

"The crust," said the stout man. "The crust." But he reached for the hood and banged it down into place.

"Back off, back off," he yelled angrily.

Eve backed off.

"Hold it," the man said.

"How's our headlight?" Mariot called.

The stout man looked sharply back at him as if to say, "Why don't you get out and look for yourself?"

"Pull ahead, honey," he called to his wife, then stood deliberately in front of Miss Connor's car while his own moved in nervous jerks past it. Then he came to Eve's side again.

"Name, address, license number, insurance company," he snapped. "I'll give you mine." He had a notebook and pencil. "But you're to blame, and don't forget it."

"Let the insurance companies fight it out," Mariot said, with frantic impatience. "How's our headlight?"

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The man gave him a glare. "Okay," he growled, "and I got a notion to kick it in. What about it, lady?"

Eve had to speak. "I don't have a p-pencil," she stammered. "I don't have my license," she said in a panicky voice, because her license was in her wallet, long gone from this car. Good luck? Bad luck? She couldn't tell. "I'm terribly sorry," she said, and pulled herself together. "I was nervous," she said loudly, hoping he would wonder.

"No license," he said. "Is that so? You insured? This your car?"

"Yes, it is. Yes, I'm insured. The Farmers," she guessed wildly.

"Name?"

"Frances Connor."

He wrote it down. "Address?"

"115 Plum Terrace."

Now he peered in at the registration slip wrapped around the steering column. Eve trembled. What was on it? She couldn't remember. Would it say, "Frances Connor, age 50, hair white"? But the stout man seemed satisfied with a mere glance.

"Driving without a license, hey?" he said nastily. "Boy, I wish there was a cop around."

Eve thought wildly, "There are swarms of them just around the corner."

"She didn't say she's got no license," said Mariot. "She hasn't got it with her."

"Oh, yeah?" said the stout man. "I heard that before, too."

He moved to the front of the car, standing with his fat legs wide and stubborn, and slowly and carefully copied the car's number plate. Mariot cursed softly. The man was taking all the time he possibly could . . .

Inside the diner, in the storeroom at the back, the cook and the boy's father were watching through a small, dark slit in the wall. The little boy, Gino, said, "Pa! What're they doing, Pa?"

"Nothing looked funny to you, Joe?" the father said. "About them two?"

"I couldn't see 'em. Probably the kid's nuts. Harvey didn't see no sign of a gun."

"It's Miss Ames," Gino said. "I know her. She knows me, too. She did this. See?" His small hands showed them prayer. "And she did something else." The boy faltered. He couldn't explain Grif Griffin in one paragraph to these two grown men.

"What do you say, Harvey?" The father turned.

Harvey, the counterman, said, *"Miss Ames!"*

"Sure, she's a teacher at my school," said Gino.

"Listen," the counterman said. "We *better* call the cops. There is a feller after her with a gun. I heard folks talking. The cops are looking all over for this Miss Ames."

"Hurry up—call," the father said.

He took the boy by the shoulder

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and held the little body close before him. A man has got to be wise when his son believes that he is. Should he go out there and stop those people? Go against a gun? Now, what was it to be wise?

Outside in the parking lot the stout man finished copying the number plate and moved aside.

"Move," Mariot said to Eve.

She let the car begin to move. She saw no help coming.

Lieutenant Lord was in the police car in sixty seconds flat after the message came. They swooped away.

"Siren, sir?"

"No, don't get him nervous."

It was going to be mighty touchy, Lord thought. This man had a gun and had the girl. Sometimes a police officer has just one chance to do the right thing. What was it?

"Frances," Geoffrey said, in weary patience, "if your car was this close to Eve's apartment, surely the police would have spotted it."

"I suppose you're right," Frances said dispiritedly. "Shall we telephone, then?" She felt tired and old.

"Where's there a phone, I wonder?" he said.

She peered ahead. "Isn't that a diner, at the end of the block?"

Geoffrey saw the diner squatting on the corner. He felt he could bear no more of this nightmare, this aimless shuttling to and fro on the streets of the town. Insane, to continue. There would be no sight of Eve, living, moving, walking on a sidewalk. It was preposterous to hope so. Maybe the world was full of wild coincidences, of happy chances, of stray encounters. But these always happened to somebody else.

No, Eve was lost. To madness, to evil, to violence. Maybe, even now when they telephoned they would hear some awful finality.

"Let's try a bar," he said suddenly. "I need a drink."

Eve began to pull away. The exit to the side street was to their left. Along the street, Eve suddenly saw Geoffrey's convertible coming —Geoffrey's bare head under the street light and Miss Connor's white one beside it. Surely they'd see her if she took Frances's own car out into their path! But when they saw her, they'd call her name.

Anyhow, she couldn't stop. Mariot was tense and hard. The gun was close under her right breast. She couldn't change direction. She didn't know what to do but go on, out into the street. And Geoffrey would brake his car and shout, and the gun would shoot!

Suddenly the stout man began to yell. "I'll call the police!" he was shouting.

"Hold it," Mariot said to Eve. "What's the matter with you now?" he snarled at the stout man.

In the street, the convertible slid

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by. The heads did not turn. They did not glance into the dark lot nor notice a strange drivers' argument. Besides, the stout man had his head at Eve's window.

"She isn't going to drive off right in my face without a license," he fumed. "Not if I know it! Who does she think she is? Doesn't she know there's a law?"

"Oh, for—" Mariot was vibrating like a plucked string.

"You gotta license, mister," the fat man said hotly, "I'm telling you, you better drive, or I'm calling the police. And I got your license number. All the crust!"

"Shift over," Mariot said to Eve angrily. "This fool—"

"Fool, am I!" the stout man raged at them. "You'll find out. What's the idea of breaking the law?"

Mariot's face was black as thunder. The right hand moved. Eve thought, "This stout man will get a bullet, too."

"It's his hand," she gasped. "Can't you see I had to drive because he's broken his hand?"

"That so?" said the stout man, jolted. His round eyes took in the bandages.

"Yeah," snarled Mariot, "and this lady—" He choked. "I'll drive, though, if you insist. Now, go soak your fat head."

"Listen, I'm sor—"

But Mariot heaved his body over Eve, and she slid under him on the seat, feeling as if decision was out of her hands forever. Mariot put his feet on the controls. He pushed at the gear lever, clumsily reaching over with his left hand. His right lay on the seat between them, and his wrist was locked unnaturally because, bound within and rigid to the hand, was the gun.

Again, they were moving. And what would he do? Where would he go? The police car came swooping in, and Eve saw Lieutenant Lord, who knew her well. He'd call, "Miss Ames!" . . . Then she could die. For Mariot, deceived and, in a way, betrayed, would plunge—oh, how gladly at the sound of her name!—into the final violence which he longed for.

She thought, "He mustn't kill me now. When he's so tired, when he is almost ready to fall, when a little more time, a moment to relax, would keep him from my murder." She felt, not fear, but a great sorrow. She put her own left hand on the steering wheel.

She said, "If you turn sharp left, we might make it. I'll help you turn. Keep on."

So the car kept moving, and Mariot believed her. It seemed the truth because it was the truth. She, too, wanted them to get away. Together, they heaved on the wheel. The car heeled about. In pure reflex, Mariot's right hand came up to help them turn the wheel.

When Eve saw it come up, and the gun point at the windshield, she knew she must betray him. With both hands she pounced and pinned

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the bandaged hand and gun against the rim of the wheel with all her strength. The car kept turning, hit the curb.

Lieutenant Lord, who had called no name at all, but leaped nimbly out of his car, was there on the left, yanking the hand brake, holding a gun in his other hand.

The lieutenant said to Eve quietly, "Are you all right?"

Mariot shriveled and faded.

"Yes, I'm fine," she said. "Oh, please, someone, *help him!*" Her eyes met the lieutenant's eyes. Lord's strong left hand was recognizing the little gun under the bandage.

"Try and take it easy, Mariot," he said. "You'll be all right." Then, quietly, "Get out of the car, Miss Ames."

Mariot's eyes turned. "Miss Ames?" he said, almost politely, as if they'd just been formally introduced, or as if he'd known this, too, for a long time. All the energy was out of him. There was another thing he'd known for a long time.

"But it's happened before," Eve cried to him, almost as if she loved him. "People have borne it, somehow. Terrible things happen in this terrible world. Other people have left a loaded gun and had their children die."

"That's what I did," he said soberly. Anguish fell in on him.

Lord said gently, "Just get out, Miss Ames. We'll take over. Someone will help him. . . ."

They were in Eve's apartment.

"Never felt so helpless," Geoffrey said. His eyes were dusty with fatigue. "I don't know, Eve, why you didn't scream your head off the moment you saw him."

"If we'd known you were in the car a little sooner," said Lord, "we might have spared you some of it."

"I'm not so sure," Eve said. "He'd have killed somebody. It took time to—to wear on him."

Geoffrey frowned. But the lieutenant nodded.

"His wife's recovering, is she?" Frances put in. She sat with her foot propped up again.

"It's partly her state of mind," Lord said, "but I think she'll make it."

"Poor people," Frances said.

"I can't pity him so much," Geoffrey said sternly. "Going around beating and shooting. He'll stay locked up, won't he?" He looked angry. The whole affair had been an outrage.

Lieutenant Lord paid no attention. "Pretty tight rope," he said to Eve, "and good balancing. Beautiful job of balancing."

"Well," she said, "*you* didn't call my name."

They seemed to understand each other.

"Dumb instinct. I didn't know he'd taken you for Miss Connor. But it isn't always so smart to yell at a man with a gun," said Lord, smiling. "A gun is a nervous thing. Sometimes you have to try to get at

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what's *behind* the gun. You were just fine."

"She's a tough one," said Frances Connor proudly.

"Terrible experience!" Geoffrey said.

The lieutenant's eyes flicked. He began to move toward the door.

"Lieutenant Lord," Eve said.

"Yes, Miss Ames?"

"Who gave the broadcaster my description?"

"Why, I did." He flushed.

"'Genteel,'" said Eve thoughtfully.

"I started to say 'gentle,'" he said, a little sheepishly, "and then —well, I couldn't. If you didn't like it, I'm sorry."

Their eyes seemed locked.

Geoffrey said, "Eve, if the officials are through with you, I think what you need is some solid food and soft music."

Eve kept looking at the lieutenant. "Solid food and gentle music," she murmured. "What a nice combination." Then she found herself blushing.

"I'll see you," the lieutenant said, flushing too. "I'm not—" His glance went to Geoffrey, and then back to this brave and dainty girl, who hadn't lost her head, who hadn't given up, who had met and survived the experience of evil—who had, for his taste, the kind of courage you had to have in this world. "I'm not exactly *through* with you," he blurted.

"Any time at all," Eve said sweetly. "Good night, Lieutenant Lord."

"Eve, poor girl," Geoffrey said, "you must be exhausted."

"Oh, be still a minute, Geoffrey," said Frances Connor quite crossly.

But she didn't look cross. Geoffrey Taggart wasn't following. To him the terrible experience was over now. Wasn't it? They went back, didn't they, to everything just as it had been before? He perceived no gain, no value. But Eve was leaning on the inside of the door. She didn't look exhausted. She looked radiant.

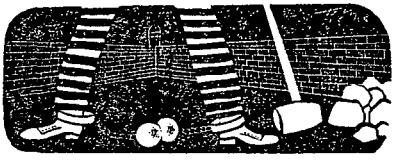
"Children," Eve said dreamily. "How I love little boys."

"Well, of course—Gino," began Geoffrey. "He was a hero straight out of a comic strip, wasn't he?"

But Frances Connor said complacently, "Terry's a good kid."

"Terry who? Do you know you've lost me?" said Geoffrey, intending to be humorous.

The women looked at him with faint little absent-minded smiles.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CECIL CURTIS**

TITLE: ***Mathematical Murder***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Suburban railway station

TIME: Waiting for the morning train

COMMENTS: *Broome knew of a case in which murder was committed by a triangle . . . A typical bit of Americana that would have tickled Mark Twain's funny bone.*

WE WERE WAITING FOR THE 7:45 which, as usual, was late. The conversation had gone its customary rounds—the unreliability of the railroad, corporate irresponsibility, the need for better management—when Carson's voice suddenly came through firm and clear: "But as Schrödinger points out, by the logic of his own laws the physicist is forced to admit the possibility of inversion. How does Schrödinger put it? Oh, yes: 'The true physical picture includes the possibility that even a regularly going clock should all at once invert its motion and, working backward, rewind its own spring—at the expense of the heat of the environment.'"

Young snorted loudly. "That's ridiculous. It's just another illustration of why these scientific fellows have to be kept under control. They yell about interference with their freedom of research, but you let 'em alone and they come up with that kind of preposterous nonsense." Young was the very embodiment of indignant, red-faced common sense as he looked challengingly around him.

The fragmented group immediately coalesced. We all listened as, more calmly, Appleton registered his view.

"That does seem a bit far-fetched, Carson. In fact, I would go so far as to apply Radcliffe-Brown's simile to such a statement. It seems, at least on the face of it, 'as absurd as to hold a quadratic equation capable of committing a murder.'"

There was a general nodding of

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agreement from all of us except Broome, who was nervously running his fingers through his hair.

"Well, now, gentlemen, I'm not so sure. Schrödinger's work is entirely out of my line, and I can't offer any comment on his theories. But Radcliffe-Brown—well, I don't know anything about algebraic theory, but I do know of a case in which murder was committed by a triangle."

He lit a cigarette, then remained silent. There was an instant clamor for the story. Broome looked at his watch and shrugged. He took a deep pull at his cigarette, and said, "It's not much of a story, but since that blasted train is late anyhow, why not? I suppose most of you have heard something about it. It happened several years ago. The murdered man was Farquhar—Professor Farquhar at the University."

"Farquhar!" exclaimed Carson. "But I don't quite see—I thought he was killed by—"

"Exactly," smiled Broome, brushing his hair again.

"Oh, come now, Broome," said Appleton. "You'll have to tell us the story. I don't know anything about it. Carson apparently does, but he is obviously as puzzled as the rest of us."

"Really, there's not much to it. Farquhar was, appropriately enough, Professor of Mathematics at the University. He'd been there for—oh, thirty years or so.

"He never married. After he came to the University, he moved around a bit before he finally found satisfactory quarters. At last he settled down comfortably in rooms that suited him exactly. His landlady was a Mrs. O'Hara. Mr. O'Hara had some kind of a job on the University maintenance staff, but the O'Hara economy was based on Mrs. O'Hara's boarders. The O'Hara house was convenient. Farquhar found it very pleasant, and he thrived on Mrs. O'Hara's home cooking.

"For their part, the O'Haras were proud of their distinguished boarder. They called him 'Professor.' Of course, Farquhar was only an instructor at the time, but distinctions in the academic hierarchy meant nothing to the O'Haras. They had a profound respect for the learned profession—an attitude that was once fairly common but which has, I fear, sadly deteriorated."

Young squirmed under Broome's mildly reproachful glance.

"Farquhar had found his niche, and he fitted snugly into it. He became an Assistant Professor. In his eleventh year at the University, and while still living with the O'Haras, he was made an Associate Professor. The O'Haras were even more proud of the honor than Farquhar was.

"One other important thing happened in this eleventh year: the O'Haras had a child. Mrs. O'Hara's widowed sister came over to help when the child was born—thus there was no interruption in the professor's comfortable routine. In fact,

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it is quite probable that Farquhar only became aware of what was going on when he was asked for permission to name the baby after him.

"Farquhar was, I suppose, flattered by this evidence of affection and respect. At the same time he was undoubtedly somewhat embarrassed by the prospect. A little probing made it clear that, while there was a genuine affection, the admiration and respect which the O'Haras felt for the Professor was in large measure a respect and admiration for learning. This pointed to a graceful out for Farquhar. He suggested that it would be much more fitting to name the boy after one of the really great men of learning—a mathematician, of course.

"This idea met with favor, so Farquhar was called on to supply a name. He declined to choose a specific name, but he did lend Mrs. O'Hara a book from which to choose one. It was one of those textbooks which include, scattered among the theorems and axioms, some one-page biographical sketches of famous mathematicians. Mrs. O'Hara chose a name, and everyone was happy about the whole matter.

"There's not much more to the story. Young O'Hara grew up not-quite-bright—in fact, he proved a mental deficient. He helped his mother around the house. As he grew up, the boarders from time to time missed small items from their rooms, but there was never any serious trouble. Farquhar continued to live with the O'Haras. Eventually he was made full professor. The years passed happily. If Farquhar ever thought about the matter at all, he was probably glad that he had avoided the misfortune of a namesake.

"Then one day he came home and found the boy rifling his desk. I can picture Farquhar standing at the door voicing a bewildered, 'Why, bless my soul!' The boy, an overgrown lout of eighteen, was panic-stricken. He seized a poker from the fireplace and broke poor Farquhar's skull."

Outside there was the noise of an approaching locomotive. Broome threw away his cigarette.

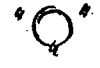
"Well, gentlemen, that's all there was to it. Here's our train."

He began to move forward.

"But dammit, man," Young exploded, "what's all this got to do with murder by a triangle?"

Broome turned slowly and grinned.

"Did I forget to mention, gentlemen, the name proudly bestowed by the doting Mrs. O'Hara on her offspring? It was Isosceles."



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLES M. SWART**

TITLE: ***Man of the Week***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A little matter of crime on a grand scale—23 murders in five years to say nothing of over 200 extortions—or $23,000,000 in coin of the realm. A wild and woolly one—but a genuine 24-carat lollapaloosa!*

THOMAS Z. HOLLAND, INDUSTRIalist, mixed three tall drinks and silently congratulated himself on his day's work. There had been times—when the reporter was digging into those first two years after World War II—when Holland had skirted close to disaster. Now the interview was over. Photographs—dozens of them—had been taken. Holland picked up two tall glasses and faced the reporter and photographer, confident that his disarming candor had again carried him safely through.

"Of course, you realize that we work well ahead of schedule on cover stories," the reporter was saying. "So don't be disappointed if you don't see yourself on the newsstands next week."

"I won't be," Holland assured him heartily, passing him a drink. "It has been quite an experience—being interviewed by *COMPETITIVE ENTERPRISE*—and quite an honor even to be considered for selection as Man of the Week." He gave the photographer the second glass and returned to the built-in bar to pick up his own.

"Your method of interviewing has been a revelation," he told Joe Manly, the reporter. "You had me telling things I had forgotten about myself. You know more about my past, my present, and my future than anyone else in the world."

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Manly waved a hand at the transcribing equipment packed neatly in its leather case.

"We put everything on tape that we can get," Manly explained. "Of course, we use only a tenth of what we get. But having it all on tape gives us the opportunity to make an intelligent selection—to present a balanced portrait. Too many people have a distorted idea of what the leaders of American business and industry are like—including the leaders themselves. We believe that the best way to defend competitive enterprise is to show the public a true picture of the men who make it work for the good of all."

"An admirable objective," Holland said with what he hoped was just the right touch of stuffiness to maintain his role. "Needless to say, I have been a subscriber since the first issue. I can testify that your magazine is doing a wonderful job. I couldn't run my business without it."

Holland watched Manly narrowly to catch any signs of skepticism. The reporter was relaxed with his drink and his companion, Chris Christensen, the photographer, was fiddling with a light meter. Holland was a man who liked to be doubly sure—in this case, certain that a businessman's publication, intent on hailing his rapid rise as a self-made captain of industry, did not accidentally come into possession of facts that might well tumble him off the front cover of *COMPETITIVE ENTERPRISE* onto the front pages of the more sensational tabloids. But the two men showed only the reassuring symptoms of relaxing after a hard day's work.

"To competitive enterprise," Holland said, lifting his own drink. Both men hesitated, then took a sip of theirs.

"I couldn't tell," Manly smiled, "whether that was all capitals, as on our masthead, or just initial caps for the system."

"All three," Holland returned his smile. "All caps for the Magazine. Initial caps for the system. And all lower case for the way you feel when you're knocking yourself out to get ahead."

"That's a newsman talking," Manly observed, appreciatively. "All caps, initial caps, lower case. You're at home with the lingo."

"It has been a long time," Holland said, putting a wistful touch in his voice. "Guess no one ever fully gets over it. But I've never been guilty of the greatest of all crimes—never told a newsman that I used to be in the newspaper game myself."

"Noticed that," Chris the photographer spoke up. "Joe had to dig it out of you."

Holland nodded his awareness of the compliment. They all drank deeply.

"That's a pretty good yarn in your local paper today," Christensen said. "The kidnaping."

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"Isn't it?" Holland agreed. "I know Brewster, the child's father. He wanted to pay off and keep the police out of it."

"Most people feel that way," Manly observed around his drink. Holland thought he saw a sharp, searching look directed at him through the half-empty glass.

"Being a bachelor, I can't say what I would do as a father if a gang kidnaped my teen-age daughter," Holland said. "But I think I would want to make sure the crooks got what was coming to them."

"Most people, if they are wise, get the child back first and then let the law catch the crooks," Manly declared.

"But then they would be hard to catch."

"That's a chance you have to take," Manly admitted. "But at least the child would be safe. Kidnaping is a stupid crime anyway. Kidnapers get caught sooner or later."

"All crime is stupid," Holland generalized.

"But not all criminals," Manly countered. "Remember when you were a reporter?—all the unsolved cases on the blotter?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Tell him about your pet yarn, Joe," Chris suggested, leaning forward in his chair. He turned to Holland: "Joe's working on a honey."

"I didn't know *COMPETITIVE ENTERPRISE* went in for crime news," Holland expressed surprise.

"Not ordinary crime," Manly confirmed. "But this involves so many business and industrial leaders that it is going to be the exception if we break it."

Holland's face showed shock.

"As victims." Manly chuckled his answer to Holland's amazement. "Not business and industrial leaders as crooks."

"Tell me about it," Holland said, his voice full of suppressed excitement. He collected the glasses for refills.

"It's a highly organized racket," Joe told Holland's square, solid back. "They threaten a kidnap, but never follow through. They collect a ransom *before* the kidnaping. If the victim pays off, they never come back for more."

"And if he doesn't pay off?" Holland turned with drinks in both hands. His face was blank.

"Sudden death," Chris said flatly. "Sooner or later, sudden death."

"But sudden death gets into the papers," Holland protested. "How can it be kept so hush-hush?"

"Nobody has connected the threats with the sudden deaths. Not on a national scale," Manly said.

"Nobody but Joe," Chris put in proudly. "Nobody else has figured it out. He's on a hot one, all right."

"How did you get on to it?"

"Clippings," Joe said. "We have one of the most complete clipping services in the country—probably the best—on all industrial and busi-

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ness leaders. We need it to spot the men we want to cover, and I have to keep up on all of them."

"I see," Holland observed.

"I began to notice that every once in a while there would be a rash of clippings about an extortion plot that was foiled by police. It always involved a locally prominent businessman. Then, within six months or a year, there would be a big obituary in the hometown paper about the same man. One died in an unexplained automobile crash while he was on vacation in Arizona. Another was shot in an unbelievable hunting accident. Another was lost at sea from a fishing boat. Now and then there would be a heart attack although the victim rarely had a history of heart disease."

"But didn't the local authorities investigate?" Holland asked.

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. You know, local authorities are not likely to be too prying about the death of a prominent man unless somebody pushes them. And these were too far apart, geographically, to make a pattern. Some of the obituaries, in the interest of complete reporting, mentioned the recently foiled extortion plots, but none ever connected them directly with the deaths."

"Show him your clipping book, Joe," Chris suggested.

"Yes," Holland said. "This is fantastic. Fascinating. I'd like to see what you have on it."

Manly took a slim leather-bound volume from his brief case and opened it before Holland on the cocktail table. Together, the two men went through the pages of clippings, several to each case—an impressive array of evidence which, accepting Joe's theory as a premise, supported his deductions.

"Twenty-three deaths in the past five years," Joe said, closing the book. "These are only the ones who *didn't* pay off. Let's say that for everyone who didn't pay, ten did. A conservative estimate. The average demand made in these cases was $100,000. That would mean a million dollars was paid for every man who didn't pay. That would be $23,000,000 in five years. That is big business."

Holland took the book in his own hands and leaned back under the lamp.

"Mind if I look this over more carefully?" Holland asked. "Mix yourself a drink."

"Go right ahead," Manly said. He walked over and mixed himself a generous Scotch and soda. Chris handed over his empty glass. After studying the book, Holland put it back on the cocktail table. Seeing that his guests still had well-filled glasses, he went over and mixed himself a drink.

"Your book makes a convincing argument for your theory," Holland said admiringly. "But how do the extortionists manage to convince their victims that they should

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pay off?—the more than two hundred you say never got into the papers."

"These bigtime operators use a clipping service too," Chris explained. "Joe says they soften up their prospect with an advance publicity campaign."

"Just how do you mean?" Holland frowned, puzzled.

"I've checked back on each one of these cases," Joe elaborated. "The pattern probably varies but I've pieced it together. The prospect gets a telephone call demanding a wad of dough. Then while he is trying to figure out whether the call was a practical joke or from a crackpot, he gets a visit from one of the gang—with a clipping book, probably like mine."

"I see," Holland's eyes narrowed as he looked from Manly to Chris. His jaw set and he took a deep breath. His hands made fists on the arms of the chair.

"The first call, by the way, is made by a woman with the kind of voice that makes you want to know her better. When she gives him the terms, he can't believe she means business until another member of the gang visits him with the scrapbook."

"And a good way for the gangster to get in to see his victim would be to pose as a writer from *COMPETITIVE ENTERPRISE.*" Holland spoke with deadly calm.

Manly's jaw dropped. Chris jumped up.

"You've been called?" Manly gasped.

"Didn't you know?" Holland asked bitterly.

"Joe," Chris shouted. "You've hit one. It's the jackpot, boy."

"You've got to believe me, Mr. Holland," Manly said. His voice was earnest. "This is just the break I've been looking for. You can call my editor right now and check."

"He stays in the office until midnight?" Holland asked, skeptically.

"Call him at home," Manly urged. "He'll tell you Chris and I are on the level. He lives out on Long Island. I'll give you his number."

"How will I know it's not a phony number?"

Manly sat silent for a moment.

"You have something there," he admitted slowly. "It's an unlisted number, so you wouldn't be able to check it through the telephone company."

"I'll call him in the morning at the office," Holland said. "That way, I'll know I'm talking to the right man. Meanwhile, I'll reserve judgment on you two—whether you are what you say you are or members of the gang you claim you are looking for."

"When did they get in touch with you?" Manly demanded, excitement in his voice.

"Last night," Holland said. "Such a lovely voice. She said to take my time and that someone would be in touch with me."

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"How much?"

"A hundred thousand."

"In old fives, tens, and twenties?"

"Yes, and I'm to be in no hurry about getting them together. So the banks won't get curious."

"And if you don't?"

"I'll be killed, as you said."

"You *are* a cool one," Chris breathed in admiration. "We've spent the day with you and didn't see a sign."

"One thing puzzles me," Manly said frowning. "In all the other cases there has been something in the man's life he had to keep hidden. Something that would ruin him."

Here it comes, Holland said to himself. Aloud he asked in a low voice, "And?"

"We researched you thoroughly before we even came here. Your record is clean. You had a good war record. While you've come up from an unknown to head a major industrial empire since the war, every move is accounted for and in the clear. What hold could they have over you?"

"I guess most men have something they want to hide," Holland sighed. He was being pretty calm about it, he thought. He was getting just the right touch into his tone.

"I still can't see how you'd fit the picture."

"Well, I might as well be frank with you. If you are on the square and we are going to fight this thing together, you deserve to have the facts. If you are part of the gang, you already have them. So what have I to lose?"

Both Manly and Chris leaned forward.

"Those two years after the war that you asked about. I told you I was just bumming around, forgetting about combat. Well . . ." Holland made a visible effort to go on. "I spent most of that time in a hospital—for alcoholics."

"I see," Manly nodded. "And she reminded you of that?"

"No. She didn't make any threats at all."

"But you were drinking with us tonight," Manly protested. "Alcoholics don't drink. Not reformed ones, I mean. Not if they are successful and intend to stay that way."

"What if it's true?" Chris interrupted. "How could it hurt you if that got out?"

"I wasn't drinking tonight," Holland told Manly. "Except from a special bottle. No alcohol." And turning to Chris: "And as for it not hurting me—if it ever got out that I am a reformed alcoholic, it would ruin me fast enough."

"But you have interests all over the country, all over the world," Chris protested. "A man who can climb to a position like yours—in ten years—and keep his nose clean . . ."

"I still have stockholders and boards of directors to account to," Holland pointed out. "As you say,

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I am a key man in a great industrial empire. For all the talk about taking an enlightened view of the alcoholic today, the fact remains that a great many people still feel that once a man has been a drunken bum he is always a drunken bum. No matter what he does to prove otherwise. And people who have money invested with you, who have trusted their futures to your hands, won't take any chances on your going on a binge at a crucial time. So, if it got around the circles I move in now, the boards would unload me fast. Probably at testimonial dinners where all the board members got politely potted themselves."

Manly chuckled grimly at the picture Holland painted.

"After you've talked to the boss in the morning, Chris and I are going to have plenty of work to do," Manly said, standing up. "He may want to come down himself and go into all the angles with you. So Chris and I had better go down to the motel and turn in for the night."

"I can't wait to hear what the boss has to say," Chris said, gathering up his photographic equipment feverishly as though his haste would speed the morrow and the time when he would learn about further developments.

Holland showed the two men to the door and stood watching as they drove away.

He smiled for a blissful moment of self-congratulation. It pays, he reminded himself, to be thorough. If they checked that West Coast hospital, they would find a complete record of diagnosis and treatment, covering the two years he had spent after his discharge personally contacting returned comrades in all walks of civilian life. These men now formed the hard core of this international network of respected citizens whose avocation—much more lucrative than their vocations—was crime.

He returned to the room and mixed himself a drink. This time he used real Scotch, not the synthetic bottle he always had kept handy for use before witnesses like those he had had tonight. It stood as a silent witness to verify his assumed shame.

Perhaps he should not have pretended that he had had the call from an advance agent of the extortion syndicate. But if *COMPETITIVE ENTERPRISE* was on the trail of the story, what would be better than to work with them and make sure that they were sidetracked until he could make certain that they could not trace the evidence to himself or any of his key men. There was an element of chance, of course, but there was less risk this way than in not knowing what they were doing.

The telephone on his desk rang and he picked it up.

"Holland speaking," he said in a low tone.

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"Mr. Holland," said a throaty, intimate feminine voice. "Mr. Manly's scrapbook is quite convincing, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Holland agreed, frowning.

"Mr. Manly reports that you pretended I had already called," the voice confided. "We are curious to know why you did that, of course, but the fact remains that you were perfectly correct in assuming that we were using *COMPETITIVE ENTERPRISE* as a front for getting to see you and put our clippings before you."

Committed as he was to competitive enterprise—all caps, initial caps, or lower case—Thomas Z. Holland could only admire the spirit of initiative that had brought him under the sights of his own riflefire. But organizational regulations required clearance before action was taken. Even though a handful of his most trusted associates were the only keymen in his organization who knew his true identity, one of them should have been available to set this insufferable upstart right.

First, Holland promised himself as the voice continued its familiar formula and he answered with an absent-mindedness that must have been interpreted at the other end as fear—first, Holland promised himself, the offender guilty of this slip-up must be disciplined. That is always the first reward of misguided initiative. Second, if discipline did not break him, the offender would have to be promoted.

The conversation over, Holland mixed a fresh Scotch and soda and toasted himself—the first man in history to have to pay off to his own organization in order to conceal a secret of which he was *not* guilty so that his employees involved in the venture would *not* learn his true identity. It was the only way he could safeguard his more sensational guilty secret.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARGERY ALLINGHAM**

TITLE: ***The Doctor and the Silver Plate***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sergeant Crate

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Sergeant Crate was famous for a trick that made him "The Muscle Man of the Metropolitan Police." But it cannot be said with truth that his superiors were happy about it.*

IF SERGEANT CRATE HAD BEEN A man with charm about him, this story would have been too tragic to relate. But even as it is, with him the thickest dunderhead God ever put breath into, his story has an element of sadness.

On what was surely the most unfortunate day in Sergeant Crate's whole existence he was walking down a narrow city street, pleased and proud of himself, as he usually was. His remarkable gift always gave him a feeling of delighted astonishment. He reflected how splendid it was that he had this gift and how the police could hardly fail to promote him soon.

His talent was remarkable, and the police doctor, who was of an inquiring mind and did not like wonders, had made him display it again and again without satisfying himself about it. Something must be double-jointed, he said, but he was darned if he saw what.

The fact was that the slender Sergeant Crate was able by some trick of muscle, leverage, or mysterious power to put any other man, up to twice his own weight, neatly upon his back on the floor. He did not know how he did it nor did anybody else.

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When he demonstrated his trick to his cohorts in the Metropolitan Police of London, they rose irritably from the floor and said, "Oh, Judo, of course. An interesting throw!" and went off sulkily, talking of something else. Sergeant Crate would swell a little and grin and mention that he never drank or smoked either.

It had gone through his mind once or twice in a vague way that it was astounding he was not more popular. But the question did not bother him. Why should it? Who cares if a man likes you or not if you can put him on his back?

On the whole Crate got along very well without popularity and on that fateful day when he was walking along Old Soot Lane, a shopping center in business London, he was as happy as a human bulldozer can be.

It was at this point that Mr. Mevagissy, the owner and proprietor of one of those tiny but appallingly expensive jeweler's shops, popped out of his doorway and beckoned to the sergeant. Innocent and proud as the day he was born, Crate went across.

Mr. Mevagissy, an elderly gnome of a man, neat and prim-looking with the mouth of a worrier, was in something of a tizzy.

He had nothing to complain of, he said, but it *was* odd . . . . There was not a sign of the man in the Medical Register. But that was not the affair of Mevagissy and Co., was it? Or was it? A firm couldn't be too careful, could it? What did the sergeant *think*?

Crate, who never thought at all according to the best authorities, appeared completely befogged, and Mr. Mevagissy hastened to make himself clear.

He said that a customer had come in that morning and left a large old-fashioned silver platter to have an error corrected in the engraved inscription. It was not a very valuable piece and could be picked up fairly cheaply in any one of the city's silver auctions.

The platter's inscription stated that it was presented to Dr. Phinias P. Roup, M.D., etc. etc., on the occasion of his marriage, by his grateful pupils and the nurses of St. Jude's Hospital, Trinidad.

The customer said that he was Dr. Roup and that he had just noticed that his second initial was given as P. and not B. He asked Mr. Mevagissy to have the trifling matter put right and arranged to call for it at noon in a week.

Mr. Mevagissy accepted the small commission without any surprise at all. As he told the sergeant, the frequency of this sort of error had long ceased to astonish him. But later, when he was wrapping the platter to send it to his back-street engraver, he noticed that the design of the piece of lettering was not quite symmetrical. That did astonish him, for that is not the sort of mistake engravers ever make.

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He then examined the blank space very carefully and discovered that something had already been erased by some other craftsman. At last, by some jewelerish method best known to himself, he found out that it was a date: 1888. Far too early to have anything to do with his customer or even his father.

The little mystery nagged him all morning and, because he was that sort of fussy little man, he went to the library on the corner and looked up Roup in the Medical Register. The name was simply not there.

He came back puzzled but, of course, not alarmed for, as he pointed out to the sergeant, the customer had done nothing but entrust him with a piece of plate. All the same, it was a peculiar little incident, and he felt bound to report it to somebody. What did the sergeant *think*?

It may have been the unfortunate insistence by Mr. Mevagissy on this fatal word, or it may have been merely Crate's unlucky day but, at any rate, his narrow, deep-set eyes appeared to move a fraction closer together. His expression became wooden and he flushed with exertion. "A week from today, eh?" he said. "He's coming back next week, is he?"

Mr. Mevagissy intimated that indeed, this was so.

"Then don't worry," said Crate. "And don't mention it to anybody else, either. I'll be along myself."

He went off even more pleased with himself than usual and when he returned to the station he did not report the matter.

This omission may seem trifling to those unacquainted with the machinery of the Metropolitan Police, but that body has one utterly inflexible rule: It is decreed that any officer receiving any suspicious information whatsoever from a responsible member of the public shall, forthwith, write it all down in longhand and pass it on to the man above him.

It is important to make it clear here that Crate knew perfectly well what he was doing. Moreover, the omission was the outcome of what was, for him, deep thought.

Crate arrived at Mevagissy's shop on the appointed day soon after the shutters were down. He had worked out a plan whereby he would spend the morning behind the silver counter as a temporary assistant so that he could serve the doctor when he arrived.

A little to his regret he discovered that Mr. Mevagissy was not particularly interested in the matter any more. A new interest was absorbing him. He told Crate about it hurriedly between frenzied orders to his two regular assistants.

He was expecting a highly important customer, he told the sergeant, "somebody, quite somebody, indeed."

Crate gathered that the distin-

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guished visitor was a foreigner, a senior member of the suite of a celebrated Indian prince, who had arrived in London in a blaze of publicity earlier in the week.

Only last night Mevagissy had received a telephone message saying that a royal representative would call to see his choicer stones on the stroke of ten in the morning.

Crate, stationed behind the silver counter in the outer room, could just see through the small doorway into the inner chamber, which was so protected it was virtually a large safe. This room, Mr. Mevagissy told him, housed one of the most interesting small collections of gems in London.

Punctually at ten, the representative arrived and was ushered into the inner room by Mr. Mevagissy and his two *bona fide* assistants. All Crate saw of him was a turban above a very dark neck.

For the rest of the morning a deep and reverent hush spread over the little shop. The visitor was both knowledgeable and thorough, and the whole of the more valuable part of Mr. Mevagissy's stock was considered.

No one else who mattered came into the shop. The few customers were met at the doorway and all but hustled out by the junior assistant before he rushed back to rejoin the séance round the table under the bright lights, where the little glasses were busy and the talk was conducted in murmurs.

The sergeant himself was almost carried away by the drama of this great deal. But when, on the stroke of twelve, a car pulled up to the curb and a man sprang out and strode into the shop, he was prepared for him.

The newcomer was a large and powerful person with the sloping shoulders of a prizefighter. However, there was nothing hostile in his manner when he walked up to Crate and made his request. His name was Dr. Roup, he said, and was his platter ready? The sergeant produced it, and his eyes were sharp and his muscles ready, but there was no sudden movement, no stealthy dive for a weapon. Dr. Roup took the silver dish in both hands, read the inscription with apparent satisfaction, and inquired what he owed.

While the police officer wrapped the parcel, the doctor fidgeted like any man in a hurry. Crate had just given the man his parcel with a growing sense of anticlimax when a sudden horrified cry came from the inner room:

"A doctor! Get a doctor! Quick!"

As Mr. Mevagissy came scuttling out with what hair he possessed standing on end, the man with the platter turned in the doorway.

"What's the matter?" he demanded without any great enthusiasm.

"I don't know!" Mevagissy was wringing his hands. "He's foaming. It's horrible." And then he

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recognized the customer. "Oh, Doctor, it's you. Thank God for that. In here, sir. Quickly."

Reluctantly, it seemed, the customer set down his parcel and went into the smaller room. The sergeant followed promptly.

The distinguished visitor lay on the floor, his face congested and his eyes tightly closed.

One of Mevagissy's assistants had undone his collar and the other, with commendable presence of mind, was shoveling the jewels back into the safe.

The doctor's examination had a professional touch which shook Crate's confidence, but only for an instant. When the pronouncement came, he was ready for it:

"This man is seriously ill. There is one chance in a thousand of saving his life. Help me to get him into my car and ring up St. Bede's Hospital, Extension 3, and warn them we'll be there in ten minutes."

Poor Mevagissy was so appalled by the disaster which had overtaken not only his client but his deal that he was ready to fall for the trick completely. But the second assistant, the one with the brains, pointed out in a startled whisper that the Burma ruby, the star of the collection, was still clutched in the sick man's hand. Nothing would open the clenched fingers, and the doctor became angry.

"Good heavens, we can't help that," he said. "Don't you understand the man is dying? Look at him. If he's holding something valuable of yours, come with us. Hurry. That's the vital thing now!"

Mr. Mevagissy looked about him wildly, and the sergeant stepped forward, only just able to keep the grin off his face.

"Let me go, sir," he murmured.

The powerful man who called himself Dr. Roup measured the young sergeant with his eye and found the answer satisfactory. "Very well," he said. "You'll do. Now then, raise the patient very carefully by the shoulders, please. Oh, and somebody bring my platter."

Crate sighed with deep satisfaction. His moment had come.

He picked up the parcel and followed the little procession out of the shop.

At first he had all the luck in the world. He waited until it became clear that wherever the self-styled doctor was driving it was not to the hospital. Then he went through the prescribed police drill for such an emergency with perfect confidence and, indeed, success.

He chose a moment when the road was clear and revealed himself as a police officer. He challenged the driver to stop, and then, when the driver refused, went smartly into action. He overpowered both men, relieved them of their guns and their loot, saved the car from destruction, and drove his prisoners back to his own sta-

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tion with the speed and efficiency of a good gun dog retrieving a couple of birds.

Only his ineffable smugness prevented several startled officers there from telling him that it was a very creditable performance . . .

The blow fell on the following morning when he was summoned to the Division Detective Chief Inspector's private office. He could hardly walk he was so pleased and he stumbled in, lowering his eyes modestly.

A silence which had something of the chill of the grave went on so long that it became embarrassing.

Crate looked up and suddenly the wraith of a doubt crept unwillingly into his mind.

The Chief Inspector never blustered, but there was acid in the man. At the moment he was not looking at Crate; but his lazy, heavy-lidded glance was fixed on the blotter on which he was making idle drawings.

After a while he began to speak in his dry, precise voice. "Ah, Sergeant," said he, "I don't suppose you've ever heard of a gentleman by the name of Elroy Muspratt? Don't tell me. I can see by the expression on your face—which I'm not even looking at—that the name is Greek to you.

"Let me tell you about him. In the first place, he's the most intelligent, the most impudent, and the most dangerous jewel thief on the continent of Europe; and in the second, he's the man for whom the whole of the Criminal Investigation Department has had its eyes skinned ever since they learned that there was a chance he was coming to this country."

Crate stood looking at his chief blankly and the dry voice continued without pause:

"Unfortunately the agents abroad lost sight of the fellow and, although all the usual precautions were taken, nobody guessed he'd have the calm effrontery to impersonate a famous Indian prince and come over with a retinue."

For the first time, he raised eyes which were as bleak as wet paving stones to survey the sergeant.

"The Superintendent in charge at the central office did all he could," he went on. "He arranged that every suspicious item, however trivial, which was reported by a jeweler should be passed to his desk. He then had his men query all other jewelers of importance to see if they had anything to report in the way of a similar incident. He got a great many, and his men did a lot of useless work, but the one item which would have paid for his attention didn't come in, and so—what do you think happened?"

He leaned forward and pulled a package of blue slips toward him.

"Eighteen of them," he said calmly. "Eighteen jewelers' shops in Greater London robbed of the finest stones in their safes. Each

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crime happened precisely at noon and each was worked in exactly the same way. You brought in two of the gang and thirty-five men got away.

"Muspratt, who was still masquerading as the prince, left the country by private plane at five minutes before one yesterday afternoon. Most of his so-called suite accompanied him. The Flying Squad is looking for the rest now."

He settled back in his chair and regarded Crate steadily.

"A week," he said distinctly. "The police might have had a full week in which to check jewelers—asking for details of any medical man who had left a piece of plate to be engraved or altered. It really would not have taken anybody long to notice that there was an unusual number of medical men who were going to collect a piece of plate the same day at the same hour."

"But why?" The startled question escaped Crate involuntarily. "Why all at the same time?"

The chief's expression was pained. "Because it was a good, simple idea," he said sadly, "and would have been foolproof but for the checking—and the reporting."

There was another long pause, and when he spoke again he sounded depressed: "Crate, you'd go further in the *uniformed* branch, my lad. We don't really need your gifts in this department. It's that parlor trick of yours, you know. I should be very careful of it if I were you. It takes the blood from your head, I shouldn't wonder."

COMING ATTRACTIONS . . .

Next Month	Special Award of Merit story; also Agatha Christie, Nelson Algren, and the Lockridges
November Issue	new stories by Robert Bloch, Frederick Nebel, and Arthur Gordon; also a novelette by Ellery Queen
December Issue	new stories by Rufus King, Shirley Barker, and Kem Bennett; also Herbert Brean, John Steinbeck
January Issue	*ALL-NEW* issue including stories by Wade Miller, Christianna Brand, and Anthony Gilbert

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Millicent Sherwood's "A True Blue Friend" is one of the twenty-three "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Twelfth Annual Contest. All we are going to tell you about this story is two things: first, exactly what the author's mother wrote when she submitted the story (addressed originally to Mr. Harry Widmer, who kindly forwarded both the letter and story to EQMM); and second, that we have not changed a single word of the author's own version—everything in the story, including the title and even one error in spelling, is precisely as Miss Sherwood wrote it.

Here is the mother's letter, complete and verbatim: "I found the enclosed story floating around in my daughter's room when I went in there to pick up a few thousand things. It was a classroom exercise, and the teacher had written 'How gruesome,' along with a grade of A on it. To me, it seemed like a pretty good story for a thirteen year old—or anyone—to write. I'm probably just a doting mother, but I had to find out, so I'm sending it along to you on the gamble that you may find it has merit enough to publish."

A TRUE BLUE FRIEND

by MILLICENT SHERWOOD

DAVE COULD TELL BY THE HISSING sound that his tire was going flat. He stopped the car, got out his spare, and began to change it. "Oh, this is great," he thought, "out in the middle of nowhere changing a tire, at midnight, yet. Lucky the moon is bright so I can see what I'm doing."

What Dave didn't see was the graveyard, or the two wierd, inhuman things coming at him, until one of them spoke: "A human being. Tonight we get blood, human blood."

Dave jumped up. Coming toward him were two things, with claws outstretched. "Who are you?" he gasped.

One spoke: "We're dead men, and we're hungry."

"You humans call us werewolves," the other added, "and we want your blood, Human."

They came at him, closer, closer. Dave was insane with fear. He babbled out, "No! No, don't kill me! I have a friend; a fat, juicy friend. I'll bring him to you. Wouldn't you rather have him than me? I'm very thin."

The werewolves agreed. Dave would bring his friend, George, on the next night of full moon, or else.

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Later Dave wondered how he could have committed himself to such a promise. But he had to do it. The werewolves were beginning to haunt him.

He invited George to have dinner with him at the country club. Later that night they passed the graveyard and had motor trouble. The wolves grabbed George and had a feast. But they weren't satisfied. They wanted another friend; just one more. What was one more? Then Dave would be free.

This time Jack was treated to a club dinner, and what a coincidence: the motor conked out right in front of the graveyard. Jack and Dave got out and looked under the hood. The werewolves grabbed Jack. They made quick work of him. Dave was just leaving when the pair came up to him. "Thank you," one said. "You have been very helpful. You carried out your part of the bargain. But there are some friends here who would like to see you."

"Well, if it isn't our old friend, Dave!" someone said. Dave turned. There were two more of those horrible creatures. Suddenly he recognized them.

"George! Jack!" he gasped. They were coming for him! "No, fellas, don't, please don't! I had to do it! I couldn't help it! Remember, we're friends . . . pals . . . *buddies!*"

A scream echoed through the cold night air. Then all was quiet and lonely except for four smiling werewolves, who weren't hungry any more.

If you enjoy ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, you will enjoy some of the other fine Mercury Publications, now on sale:

- FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION—*The September issue of this top-flight monthly features two novelets: Robert F. Young's powerful science fiction adventure, "Goddess in Granite," and the delightfully exciting fantasy, "St. Dragon and the George," by Gordon R. Dickson. Also tales by Chad Oliver, Robert M. Coates, Robert Bloch and other favorites.*
- VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION—*this new, fast-paced sf magazine hits its stride in the September issue with Floyd Wallace's penetrating tale of "The Nevada Virus," Avram Davidson's never-to-be-forgotten, "Now Let Us Sleep." Also Theodore Sturgeon and others.*
- MERCURY MYSTERY BOOK-MAGAZINE—*William Campbell Gault's detective thriller, "Don't Call Tonight," is the featured novel in MMB-M's October issue. Plus other mystery bests.*
- BESTSELLER MYSTERY NO. 206—*"The Black Angel," by Cornell Woolrich. Abridged. "Packed with action," says* The Saturday Review.
- JONATHAN PRESS MYSTERY NO. 93—*"The Basle Express," by Manning Coles. Abridged. "Fast-paced," says the San Francisco* News.

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

BUNNY LAKE IS MISSING *by EVELYN PIPER* (HARPER, $2.95)	". . . hair-raising, and the emotional goings-on entirely credible." (LGO)	". . . in a class by itself . . . enthralling. Highly recommended." (H-M)
BE SHOT FOR SIXPENCE *by MICHAEL GILBERT* (HARPER, $2.95)	"Hair-raising adventures . . . a real shocker." (FC)	". . . told briskly . . . by an intelligent tough-minded narrator." (H-M)
METHOD IN MADNESS *by DORIS MILES DISNEY* (CRIME CLUB, $2.95)	". . . this is believable, warm and quietly skillful." (LGO)	". . . impressive characterization, convincing and moving throughout." (AdV)
THREE FOR THE CHAIR *by REX STOUT* (VIKING, $2.95)	". . . situations and solutions unusually good ones . . . rich in unexpected Wolfiana." (AB)	". . . author's vigorous prose has never been better." (FC)
THE GIRL WHO KEPT KNOCKING THEM DEAD *by HAMPTON STONE* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.75)	". . . a solid and satisfactory job." (AB)	"Plenty of suspects, and all of them are absorbing characters. Top flight." (CC)
SEE ROME AND DIE *by LOUISA REVELL* (MACMILLAN, $2.95)	". . . pleasant, touched with a nice wit, but rather involved . . ." (LGO)	". . . delectable story . . . Not to be missed." (AdV)
IN THE QUEENS' PARLOR *by ELLERY QUEEN* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $3)	". . . wholly captivating to any prowler of mystery by-paths . . ." (AB)	". . . a fascinating nonfiction venture, part autobiography, part essay, part shop talk." (CC)

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times;* CC: *Curtis Casewit in the Denver Post;* FC: *Frances Crane in the San Francisco News;* H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair;* LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle;* AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOSEPH WHITEHILL**

TITLE: ***The Town Is Waiting***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Upper Camp

TIME: December

COMMENTS: *Six men and a cook are snowbound while preparing a camp for next summer's dudes . . . a character study in depth, with Whitehill's hallmark—marvelously authentic detail.*

THE FIRST SNOW OF THE WINTER came to Upper Camp late in a dark December afternoon. It began with fat wet flakes which dropped swiftly through the still air and melted at once where they fell; but soon they began to come slower and denser, with white crossing swirls, and someone called gaily up through the woods, "Time to quit!"

Each of the six men who were dispersed outdoors welcomed, in his own way, this recess in his workaday labor. Ernie and Russ Schlage and powerful John John stopped their blasting down at the spring, where they were building a paddling pool for next summer's dudes; they brought their drills and sledges and powder up to the barn and put them away in the gloomy saddle room. On their way across the clearing to the log bunkhouse, Ernie scraped together a snowball and heaved it into a great yellow pine.

Fred Hoke and Tiny Morrow and gentle Dilly Augh quit their splitting of new rails for the corral and also put away their tools. With lazy laughter that told they sensed a holiday, blinking away the snowflakes that tangled their eyelashes, they entered the warm bunkhouse.

Of all the men, only fat Cooky Arlice in the kitchen was disturbed by the coming of the snow. With his sugar-sack dishtowel he wiped the steam from the windowpane and then, while the towel still held the cold of the window, he wiped the sweat from his full face and the plump nape of his neck. He blinked

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out at the dense snowfall. He could no longer see the barn as a barn; it was no more than a dark shape in all the cold white out there. Disgustedly, he balled up the dish-towel and threw it onto the board counter.

Tiny Morrow and huge John John stamped into the kitchen and Cooky turned away from the window. John John kicked the stack of billets by the big black stove. "How's your wood?"

"There's enough till after breakfast," Cooky said absently. "Look at that stuff out there . . . If it had just held off two more weeks we'd have been done and gone out of here. Way it is now I don't know . . . And think of all that new food sitting down there at the Lodge . . ."

Cooky was to have taken two men and three of the pack horses tomorrow the twelve rocky miles down the cañon to the main Lodge. Waiting there to be packed in to the Upper Camp were a side of beef and forty pounds of bacon and a hundred pounds of white flour, all of which Cooky needed immediately to right his imbalanced inventory. There were other things he needed too, things he could see in his mind when he imagined the full shelves of his big bright kitchen at the Lodge. Bay leaves and thyme and cloves and honey and green yeast and, yes, even saffron for his salmon casserole. For Cooky Arlice had risen above being just a flour-and-lard cook, and took pride in his rising; these summers of association with city people—dudes who knew how to eat—had taught him some things.

Tiny Morrow was called Tiny, contrary to Western stereotype, because he was small. He was small and tough and strong for his weight, and the horses seemed to like him for it. He stared solemnly out the kitchen window. "You ain't going anywhere if this keeps up," he said.

"Don't know," Cooky said sadly.

For supper that night he served the last of the steaks, with French fries and individual salads of pale canned asparagus. (Each salad wore a bright corporal's chevron of paint-red canned pimento.) And he built a pineapple upside-down cake for dessert.

At toothpicking time after supper, while the men were still over their coffee and tobacco, Fred Hoke cleared his throat in an advertising way and laboriously composed his face for his nightly joke. Cooky Arlice, who was still eating—after the manner of camp cooks, who always eat last—saw Fred do it and dropped his eyes to his food. *All day long every day I ruin myself thinking about this coming after every supper,* he thought; *why should this one thing bother me so much?*

"Haw!" Fred Hoke said. He troubled the remains of his upside-down cake with his fork. "I see by this junk here, Cooky's gone and shoveled out the stalls again!" Then,

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wearing a grotesque grin on his mouth and a nervous, pleading look in his eyes, he looked around at the other men. The one-chuckle responses of the others were slight and perfunctory . . .

In the black dawn next morning, as Cooky clumped about the cabin in his unlaced half-boots, the night-cold made the candlestick shake in his hand. He opened the dampers and lighted the oil-drum stove in the bunkroom and his black iron cookstove in the kitchen, somehow knowing as he did it that the snow had continued all night. When he opened the kitchen door on the darkness outside, a white kitten of snow darted in at the bottom of the door and fawned about his feet. He pushed the door shut, trimmed both dampers, and rolled back into his bunk. *No sense getting six o'clock breakfast if these guys aren't going anywhere . . . I'm not going anywhere either, dammit.* He listened for a little while to the powerful snores around him, then fell back to sleep.

It snowed all day, sometimes densely and other times only lightly. The men stayed indoors, going out only to fork down feed for the six little horses and to use the privy. They played cards and read tattered Westerns and whittled. The convictionless remark was passed several times about how good a thing this snow was for the fields above timberline.

At two in the afternoon, when all the rest were nodding or asleep, John John and sweet Dilly Augh wandered into the kitchen where Cooky was busy punching down his risen bread dough, and inquired if he had anything they could do to keep busy.

Here it is again, Cooky thought with modest pride, *me being the one they ask what to do; my name is Mother-Father-Cooky and sometimes these elephants are my little boys.* He folded his fat, powerful, spatter-burned arms across the front of his high apron and said, "Well, that bunkroom's pretty much a mess. You can use those brooms over there if you want. Tidy the place up real nice." But after Dilly and John John had left with the brooms, Cooky grew alarmed and thoughtful. While he brushed his loaves with glaze, he marshaled in his mind all the indoor jobs that wanted doing, or could be made later to *seem* to want doing.

By nightfall the snow was up to the first rail on the corral fence.

Fred Hoke's sally that night was about the fine fresh bread. He rolled a wad of it around in his fingers and said with his mouth-grin, "Boys, here's just what we need to chank up them holes in the barn!" The response of his audience was, as usual, small and bored. Cooky looked the other way.

It snowed all the second night; by morning it was level with the window sills of the cabin. The conversation at breakfast made it out

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that this was the heaviest single fall any of the men had seen in recent years, though of course in the old days it was like this every winter. Cooky was privately concerned by the testy cast of the talk around him. There was no more cursing than was customary, but each curse sounded freighted with greater sincerity than was usual.

So when great John John ambled fidgeting and swearing into the kitchen after breakfast looking for something to do, Cooky welcomed him gladly, even though he, Cooky, had just peeped into the last can of baking powder and seen its shining bottom. "Here. Fresh tea," Cooky said. John John accepted a mugful and, as though for amusement, put his nose into the rising steam. "Now, as I see it," Cooky went on, "there's lots to do if you'll sort of lead the way. First thing might be to get the paths shoveled proper out to the barn and the woodpile and the privy."

John John put down his tea mug. "All that shoveling won't take us till but noon. Then what?"

"Come back after lunch. We can think of something."

"Okay," John John said, and went into the other room.

Half an hour later, when all the muffled-up men filed through the kitchen and out into the snowfall, Dilly Augh followed last, humming cheerfully and waltzing lightly with himself. After he had gone out he put his head back inside and said to Cooky with a giggle, "Hey! Looks like she's quitting some!" He withdrew his head and tugged at the door from the outside. "Unh—*unh!* You'll hafta close it from in there, Cooky."

"All right," Cooky said. Before he bumped the snow-jammed door shut he looked out at the sky. It had lightened some, and the snowflakes were smaller and seemed more random.

Alone now in the cabin, Cooky sharpened his pencil with a potato knife and set about taking inventory of the remaining food. He hefted every crate and sack and pannier in the lean-to coolhouse and wrote down a conservative guess of its weight. He peeped into each crock under the counter and twice inspected all the bins and curtained shelves. Then he took off his wrap-around apron and sat down heavily by the window to stare alternately at his penciled inventory and the bleak sky outside. He divided and changed and scribbled at his list for two hours, betweentimes sucking the eraser of his pencil and listening to the dull *thunking* of the shovels outside.

He concluded, after testing it many ways, that ample supplies remained to keep them twelve days more in the camp while they waited for a thaw—provided the men adapted to a somewhat bizarre diet. The inventory was long on onions, potatoes, apples, and dried fruit, and was unhappily short of proteins.

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Each man could have one egg every other day. If Cooky shaved it thin, the bacon would last five more breakfasts. Four meals of hung beef remained, and a little salt pork. Cooky was uncomfortably ashamed of this imbalance he had allowed to happen. If no thaw came before the twelfth day, the problem would then shift from getting food into the men to getting the men out to the food. To Cooky, there was nothing in this of the nature of a dire emergency. It was an interruption and a chore. So he set aside all the canned corned beef as trail food, to be packed out should they be obliged to go out afoot on a four-day push down to the Lodge.

After lunch, while the men were still around the table, Cooky explained the food situation in careful detail, and ended saying, "Now if one of you boys was to go out and get us a deer, the meals around here would look a lot better. I don't expect you'd meet the game warden."

Russ Schlage said softly, "And doe meat's just as good as buck."

"That's up to you," Cooky said.

"Haw!" Fred Hoke said. "Up to us! What we *ought* to do is give Cooky a stick of firewood and—*heel*—send him out in the snow to club us a porcupine. Cooky'd make us an elegant porky stew and serve us the quills for toothpicks."

After a short discussion the idea of a deer hunt was abandoned. Dilly Augh made the point when he said gently, "Cooky, it's up to you out there."

A little later John John came into the kitchen yawning greatly and scratching. "Anything we can do, Cooky?" He kicked the woodstack with his boot. "You all right for wood?"

"All right for now," Cooky said. "But you know, John John, there's twenty-eight saddles out in the saddle room that are going to need going over good before spring. Washing and scraping and saddle-soaping."

"Aw, Cooky, it's too cold out there. You're hands'd freeze and fall right off."

"Bring them in the bunkroom. You can rig saddlebucks across the bunk rails."

"You got saddlesoap?"

"Eleven cans. I counted them, too, this morning."

"All right." So the men bundled up again and went out to the saddleroom in the barn and brought in all the saddles and bridles and halters and hobbles and created a chaos of dumped and splayed leather on the bunkroom floor. Everyone whittled himself a blunt pine scraper to loosen the caked black deposits of riding dirt, and got rags and hot water from Cooky. Cooky looked sadly at the snowy mess his kitchen floor was, then localized it by sweeping the slush over to the door.

The men made the saddle work last the afternoon and all the next day, and when they carried them

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back to the saddle room before supper, the saddles glowed a deep clean red in the late sun.

The next day—the fifth after the coming of the snow—was quiet and cold and sunny bright, and at Cooky's suggestion made offhand to John John the men stamped a small clearing in the snow near the cabin, dug out the sawbucks, and spent the day cutting and splitting stovewood and stacking it by the kitchen door. Supper that night was pork and beans enamel-crusted with the last of the brown sugar, and bannock spread with margarine and a synthetic-cherry jelly which had heretofore found ill favor at the table. Fred Hoke remembered his former dislike of this jelly and, though he had just eaten liberally of it, said, "This is the stuff they make out of battery acid and old red ink, ain't it?" At this Cooky stared down at his plate and chewed in metronomic rotary fashion. Swallowing was an effort, but he tried to keep it from showing.

But something besides the food seemed to be riding Fred Hoke. Addressing the company generally, but regarding Tiny Morrow balefully from time to time, he said, "Now, there's some things that's fair and there's some things that ain't fair. Share and share alike, that's fair. But holding out on your buddies, that ain't fair. That's hoarding. Ain't it?" Everyone except Tiny Morrow was looking at him. "*Ain't* it, I ask you?" Ernie Schlage nodded finally, so Fred resumed, "Now, what would you think of a guy that had almost a full fifth of whiskey in his clothes bag and wouldn't pass it around to his buddies?"

Heads raised, and the men looked at each other all attention. Russ put down his tea and asked, "Who is it has this whiskey?"

Fred closed his eyes in a long slow blink. "Did I say there was anybody? I just asked you what you'd think of a guy like that."

The group's two opinions came out at once. Ernie Schlage grinned and said, "Why, he ought to pass it around, *I* think."

And his brother Russ said, "If it's his and he bought it and toted it up here and made it last this long, then he ought to get to drink it all by himself. But it'd be nice to have some, all right."

"Yes," said some of the others.

John John leaned his great shoulders toward Fred Hoke. He spoke earnestly, "All right now, who is it's got that whiskey?"

Fred smiled with sly and teasing restraint, and was about to reply when Tiny Morrow said, "I do." He was pale and his eyes rolled whitely. "I don't know what business it is of anybody's, but *I* have it. And I expect to keep it, too. I've bought my share of the drinks for you guys—you all know that. In town. But you all drank up what you'd brought inside of a week after we came up here and I saved mine. I

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stretched it out . . . What were you doing, Fred, spying?"

"Why, Tiny, the fine smell of it woke me up last night." Fred spoke loudly, for the crowd. "And I saw you nipping over there in your bunk."

When the men began to tease Tiny, he took it well. He shook his head and put them off deftly. Then the teasing waned and the men forgot him and shoved the candles together on the table and brought out the cards.

On his way out to the privy before the game began, Fred Hoke stopped in the kitchen and looked over Cooky's shoulder at the scummy water in the dishpan. With serious interest he said, "Mmm—soup for tomorrow, huh?"

Without looking up, Cooky said, "Go on. You're a troublemaker, Fred."

Fred swatted Cooky on his plump behind and went out the door roaring, "Haw, haw!" He left the door a little ajar so Cooky shook the water from his hands over the dishpan and went to the door and bumped it shut.

A little later, after the game had begun, Cooky was using up the last of the white flour to make Italian long loaves when Tiny Morrow came out into the kitchen. He spoke so softly that Cooky had to stop sifting to hear him. "Cooky—uh—Cooky, what am I going to do about that bottle of mine? Fred wants it bad. I know he does."

Cooky drew marks in the air-light mound of flour and sucked his plump, sweaty upper lip while he thought. "Why don't you drink it up all at once and get rid of it that way?"

"I don't want to. I can't drink that way. I just like to have a little snort of an evening to help me sleep. I get sick when I drink a lot."

"Or you can try hiding it outside somewhere."

Tiny whispered, gesturing toward the cooler door, "How about in there?"

"No," Cooky said. "I don't want it around. I might drink it myself."

"Not you. You wouldn't do anything like that."

"I don't want to be in this argument. Hide it outside somewhere."

"Well . . . all right," Tiny paused, looking into Cooky's eyes, then said, "It's a hell of a note to have to hide stuff from your own buddies."

"If you're going to have stuff like that around you've got to expect it."

"I'll get it out some time tomorrow when there aren't so many around," Tiny said as he left Cooky's kitchen.

The next day was Sunday—welcome because Sunday is by custom a day when men may idle without chafing. The men used up the morning with sleeping late, and then with desultorily going about the melting of snow in tubs on the kitchen range to wash their socks.

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For lunch Cooky served pork and beans again, and made three dried-peach pies using boxed mix for the pastry. When the pork and beans came to the table, Fred Hoke groaned dramatically, gagged, and covered his face. Cooky lifted the iron lid of the Dutch oven and looked down for a moment at the savory bubbling beans. He shut Fred Hoke out of himself by noting with pleasure that his careful herringbone arrangement of the short pieces of salt pork on top of the beans had survived the volcanic disturbances of cooking. He took the lid back to the kitchen with him and returned carrying the big stoneware pot of tea.

The early part of the afternoon passed unmarked; the bored and sleepy men moved about the cabin only to be moving, and took trips to the barn and the woodpile and the outhouse, treasuring the trips as events. They paid little attention to each other or to anything else as they went aimlessly about. Cooky washed the dishes and went to the privy and came back and sat alone in the kitchen trying to devise something new to do with the food he had.

Just as he was wondering whether an onion stew would seem ridiculous to the others, there came from the bunkroom a long mad scream of rage. Cooky straightened and dropped his pencil in the silence that followed the scream, and wondered who it was; he was not acquainted with the screams of these men.

"*I been robbed!*" it came again, and Cooky knew it was Tiny, and knew also what was missing.

Cooky went to stand in the doorway to watch. The men were quiet, in waiting attitudes, all looking at Tiny. Tiny was alone by his bunk, leaning his back against the post, facing all the others and holding his khaki clothing bag in both fists. His small face was blotched with red, as though he had been slapped there hard. He held the bag out before him and whispered, "Looka here!" —as though he were explaining magic to children. Then he upended the bag and turned its contents out on the rough floor. Clothing was all that tumbled out. He dropped the bag on the pile of clothes and, with one shoulder sagging queerly, walked over to Fred Hoke's bunk.

Fred lay waiting in the upper bunk. Tiny stopped and stood nearby looking hard at him. "Well?" Fred said. Then he winked at the men who sat silent in their places at the table holding forgotten cards.

"Well, let me smell your breath."

"I will not."

Tiny appealed to the rest. "This s. o. b. stole my whiskey. Shouldn't he ought to let me smell his breath?"

"Go ahead, Fred," John John said.

"I won't either. Get this little squirt outa here. I wanta sleep."

John John came over, his expres-

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sion troubled and unsure, and said, "If you didn't steal his whiskey, then let him smell your breath."

"Nope. Go away."

"You hear what I said?" John John asked, surer now. Fred Hoke rolled over, turning his back to everyone. John John reached in and took Fred by the neck with both hands and dragged him half out of the bunk. He held him bent over the bunk rail with his head twisted wryly upward. Fred did not struggle. He made *cuck-cuck* sounds in his throat. "Whee," John John said. "I smell it. You smell it."

Tiny stood on tiptoe and sniffed noisily, then stepped back and jigged in rage, pointing. "It's on him!" he cried. "He smells like a bar! Where is it? Give it back!"

John John released Fred, who got himself all the way back in his bunk again and lay there breathing hard and loose-mouthed. "That ain't your whiskey," he said sourly. "It's vanilla extract."

Cooky left the doorway and went to look on his shelves. His eyes were shining with tears when he came back. Ernie Schlage asked, "Is there some gone?"

Cooky said, "Yes. All of it."

Young Dilly Augh, sitting in his place by the oil-drum stove, surrounded by a litter of magazines, spoke up shyly, "Well, now wait a minute." He ran both hands back over his crown of pussy-willow hair. "Fred don't get credit for that. It was him had the idea, but it was me took it and it was me drunk it." He giggled embarrassedly. "Was pretty bad, too. Sorry, Cooky."

Cooky licked his lips and sniffled and leaned his white-wrapped bulk against the door frame.

"Where's my whiskey, then?" Tiny asked of the room. "John John, feel of his bag, would you?"

John John kneaded Fred's bag and said, "Ain't there."

Tiny screamed at Fred, "Where'd you hide it, you?" Fred lay silent. Tiny said, "Hey, John John, poke around his bedroll there at the foot. What's that lump?"

John John felt. "Maybe," he said. He pulled aside the brown canvas leaves of Fred's bedroll, exposing the blankets. Fred's boot kicked out once at John John, striking him on the shoulder. John John paused in his disarranging of the blankets to anchor Fred's foot with one hand and hit him in the calf with the fist of the other. Fred groaned loudly and drew his leg up to hold it.

John John pulled out the bottle and held it up. "My God, it's half gone!" Tiny wailed. John John set the bottle on the table.

"It ain't either," Fred said, speaking tightly past his pain. "I just took one good poke at it and put it up to split with the rest of you guys."

"Anybody believes that stand on your head," Ernie Schlage said cynically.

Tiny appeared near hysteria, twitching and slapping his arms against his sides. "Go on, you guys,

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finish it up! Yeah—go on, you wolves, drink up my—drink up my blood!" To Fred, who was facing the log wall, he said coolly, "You're a stinking thief."

Mechanically, his wondering eyes on Tiny, Ernie unscrewed the top of the bottle before him and took a long pull. He licked his lips and passed it to his brother. Thus the bottle went around the room until Dilly Augh finished it.

Fred Hoke turned over and asked, "Hey, don't I get a little? It was me hooked it, remember."

Dilly said, "You already had yours. Besides, there ain't any more."

Cooky Arlice left the doorway and went to sit alone in his kitchen. He felt weak. He reflected, trivially, that after this afternoon's entertainment the men might very well accept his onion stew in silence.

But when he carried in his invented onion stew that night, Fred Hoke said, "This here's very unusual stew. It's beef stew, you see, but there ain't any beef in it. Or it's chicken stew without any chicken. You get a prize if you figure out which. Cooky, I got an old saddle out there in the barn I'll chop up for you next time you want to make this urp. Give it some character." The company at the candle-lit table roared with laughter at this. Even Tiny Morrow smiled. Tempers appeared restored, and all the onion stew was eaten.

Next morning was Monday, and Cooky got early breakfast; one egg to a man, with pancakes from a box to fill out their stomachs. He came in with the last two plates saying with weary good cheer, "The cook always gets the best pancakes. The griddle's just right by the very end of the batch." He put one plate at Fred Hoke's empty place and sat down with the other.

The men ate in sleepy ill-humor for a few minutes until Russ Schlage asked, "Where's Fred? His egg's getting cold."

Dilly Augh said, "Expect he's up to the privy. Hey, Cooky, go look behind the stove and see if the privy seat's gone."

Cooky wiped his mouth and went into the kitchen and looked behind the stove, where the privy seat was kept in winter. He returned to the table bringing with him the inexhaustible pail of synthetic cherry jelly, and said, "It's gone. That's where he is. Give me his plate there and I'll put it in the warmer."

"I'll go give him a yell," Dilly said. He went to the back door and shouted, and the rest of the men fell quiet together to listen. There was no answer. "What's the matter with him? Deaf?" Dilly hooked his big woolen coat down from the wall and stamped out.

He returned very quietly a few minutes later, weaving a little; though he addressed Cooky directly, he really spoke to them all: "Fred's laying dead out there by the path to the privy. He's still got the privy seat under his arm, but his head's all

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mashed in from behind." Dilly was very pale.

With a sudden beating of boots on the wooden floor five men rose from the table at once and went coatless out the door. Cooky, though, paused long enough to don his coat over his apron. The white, knee-length apron extended comically below the skirts of his coat.

The men trotted single file up the beaten-snow path and lined up beside the half buried body of Fred Hoke. In the dim light of the coming day they saw his kerosene lantern resting in a hole of its own melting, partly tilted on its side, smoking and glowing redly. Blood had soaked deeply into the snow about Fred's head, making a dark and glossy sunken basin under his shoulders. Cooky blew out a breath and watched its dense white plume in the air, slapped himself with his arms, and said, "It's too cold out here." He started back to the cabin.

At this signal all the others except Tiny followed immediately. Tiny stood on the path a moment, shivering in evident hesitation, then hastily bent and freed the privy seat from beneath Fred's stiff arm. He trotted with it back down the path and caught up with the others at the cabin-door.

Inside again, each took his place at the table and picked up exactly where he had left off. After a silent time of eating and drinking, John John cleared his throat apologetically and, with his eyes cast down to his empty plate, he said, "Uh—Cooky, I'm—I'm still awful hungry. If nobody else wants it I'll eat Fred's breakfast."

Open-eyed, Dilly said softly, "My God!"

John John said, "Well, I'm hungry." When Cooky brought in the plate the men glanced obliquely at it, then averted their eyes. John John said, "Thanks, Cooky." When he cut the egg he mumbled, "It got hard in the warmer," then lapsed into silent chewing.

Ernie's fingers trembled so when he tried to roll a cigarette that the dry flake tobacco fluttered down out of the paper and he gave it up. He stared at the mess he had made, then said unrelatedly, "Sone one of us done that to Fred."

No one disagreed.

Then Dilly Augh's clear tenor voice drove a knife into them all. He said, "You boys see how Tiny went right up to Fred out there and took away the privy seat? I couldn't ever of done that."

"Hey now," Tiny cried in dismay.

And so it was that the snowbound cabin was turned into a vessel of tension and despair. Tiny argued good-naturedly. Tiny enlisted logic. Tiny protested. Tiny grew desperate and appealed to each of the others in private, then implored them all together. But they were firm in their fear of him, and unrelenting. That night they obliged Tiny to move his bedroll into the kitchen and they locked him there until morning.

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On the next day—it was Tuesday then—John John and the Schlage brothers wrapped Fred's frozen, awkwardly composed body in the canvas cover of his bedroll, floundered with it to the edge of the woods, and slung it up with pack-ropes between two scale-barked yellow pines, out of reach of animals. No one wanted it in the barn.

Coming in from his wretched work with his clothing clogged with snow, John John stamped angrily at the kitchen door, shrugged out of his huge coat, and said to Tiny, "What'd you do it with? You give him an awful belt. Chunk o' stove wood maybe?"

Tiny was sitting on an empty dynamite case in the stove corner clumsily peeling potatoes. Looking smaller than ever, he turned his red eyes up to John John and said, "I didn't do it."

John John took a potato from the pan in Tiny's lap and crushed it in his fist under Tiny's chin. *"Ahhhh!"* he growled, and dropped the squeezed potato rubbish back into the pan.

Cooky put his hand on John John's shoulder and said flatly, "Leave him be, John John. Go on in the other room." John John obeyed immediately.

Supper that night was a hectic time. It seemed as though everyone had a plan. Some were for starting the next day on the push down the cañon to the Lodge. Others were more interested in pressing an outright confession from Tiny. Tiny, who ate alone in the kitchen, offered no remark at all through the open door.

When dessert time came and there was no dessert, Dilly asked, "Hey, Cooky, no pie?"

"No pie," Cooky answered coldly.

Then John John climbed out of his place at the seating bench, jarring the table severely with his knee, and stood tall in the candlelight as he spoke down to them. "I guess you guys'll sit there and talk-talk-talk all night, but me, I'm goin' in there an' drag him back here an' twist his arm some. You all know he did it. *I* know he did it. Let's just get him to say so an' we'll all feel better."

The men stirred and looked at each other, but no one spoke up to oppose. John John went into the kitchen. Tiny screamed once, a scream of sheer terror, then the two of them appeared in the doorway. Tiny came first, taking short steps and walking high, because one of his arms was twisted up behind him. "Quit it, you bully," Tiny said, almost weeping.

"Come on, now," John John pleaded, "tell us." And he twisted Tiny's arm up higher.

Tiny's eyes closed pucker-tight and he went *eeep* with the pain.

Cooky's biding restraint gave out and he said, "Stop." John John stopped, and Tiny's eyes quivered with relief.

John John looked at Cooky. "Why?"

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"Let him go," Cooky said. John John did so, and waited. Cooky spoke to Dilly Augh, "You want to know why no pie tonight? There won't be any more pies. Ever. I—I can't touch the rolling pin, that's why." Cooky sagged in his resignation. "It was the rolling pin I hit Fred with."

All the men seemed to sigh at once, and in the silence after the sighing the oil-drum stove let a chunk of burning wood fall somewhere inside itself, then went on humming its deep bass wind note.

Tiny whispered, "Thanks, Cooky."

Dilly Augh said softly, "Cooky, you didn't say that just to get Tiny off, did you?"

"No."

"But *why?*" John John asked. Huge, and rocking on his feet in stunned shock, he appeared a destroyed man.

Cooky was silent a long time, giving the rest the impression he did not intend to answer. Then he roused himself and said slowly and thoughtfully, "I don't know exactly . . . It kind of came on me . . . All this snow, maybe." He paused. "At first, when the snow came and you were all driven indoors, I felt somehow I'd got to be a bigger man here. You needed me worse. Your food was all you had to entertain you. Oh, I tried. I really did try, but we were short on so many things . . . I couldn't cook for you the way I *wanted* to, but I tried. I explained to all of you about the food. But Fred wouldn't give up his fun. He didn't want to see that things were changed from ordinary. He didn't think I had feelings. He didn't see that what was funny enough when you all had work wasn't funny any more when the kitchen stove all of a sudden turned into the most important thing around here. Something slipped . . ." Cooky fell silent.

John John asked huskily, "What are we going to do, Cooky?"

Cooky raised his head. "You still asking me things to do?"

"There isn't anybody else to ask."

Cooky smiled wanly. "Well, now."

Then Dilly Augh began to speak, the words coming softly, full of wild halts and sharply awkward shifts of course, like a cañon stream new released by the spring melt. "It's this way . . . In any bunch of guys like we are, Cooky, it seems like there's always just one that's—that's, well, *been to town* oftener than the rest of us . . . You know what I mean, been to town? It's a different way of being from the rest of us. The guy that comes back from town to where the rest of us have been waiting all the time—he's dressed up in his good clothes and he has the truck full of stuff he's bought in the stores, and he's happy, see, and busy, and everybody gets together around the truck glad to see him back, and helps him unload and carry the stuff in. Well . . ." Dilly hesitated, as though he questioned the propriety of speaking these things aloud. "I'm getting all tangled up in this—d'you get me

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sort of? Well, Cooky here, he's always seemed to me just fresh back from town. Bringing with him something—*I* don't know what—but you'll never find it in the back of the truck. A bunch of guys needs to have somebody like that because they don't get to town so often, and they forget what it's like and how to act, and they get, well, mean. They quit helping each other and start rubbing against each other. That's what happens if they don't have just one guy that everybody else thinks knows the —well, the right way, sort of. That's all." Dilly suddenly bent away from the rest to tend the barrel stove.

John John, still standing, cleared his throat and said, "Hum. Yeah. All right. So, Cooky, what are we going to do?"

Cooky rose in silence from the table and went to his bunk and lay down in the cavernous gloom beyond candle reach, where the others could not see his face. He lay on his back and talked to the woven ropes on the underside of the bunk above him. His voice was tired and flat. "You boys pack up tomorrow morning early, all of you, and hike on down to the Lodge. I'll stay here and tend the horses. When you—get to town—do what you have to do."

John John said, "You know, Cooky, there ain't any reason this has to go farther than us. I mean, we'd all stick together for you, wouldn't we?"

"Yes," everyone said.

"No," Cooky said. "You can't do what I did. You can't forget that Dilly's *town* is still there, whether you've been there lately yourself or not."

Someone in the room was sniffling softly.

Dilly asked, "Cooky, will you be here when we get back?"

Cooky said, "Sure, sure. Don't you worry about old Cooky. I'm going to spend my time cooking a banquet for every meal, and nobody to criticize . . . You boys get ready to leave, all of you, that town of yours is waiting."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **C. B. GILFORD**

TITLE: ***Bull in a China Shop***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Dennis O'Finn

LOCALE: 909 Sycamore Street

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Five gaunt, determined spinsters: Misses Green Shawl, Baby Blue Ribbons, Old-Fashioned Bonnet, Necklace of Pearls, and Starched Apron—old lace and arsenic in a musty boarding house—and a magnificent specimen of an Irish cop.*

DENNIS O'FINN, PLAINCLOTHES detective first class, had a rapt audience when he said, "Ladies, I'm pleased to tell you that in the case of the death of your good friend, Miss Eloise Albertson, the police can find no evidence of foul play. So you can all rest easy."

He scanned the circle of faces and failed to see what he thought he'd see—relief from suspense and fear. He saw instead—or he thought he did—of all things, disappointment.

"Can you be sure of that, Mr. O'Finn?" somebody breathed.

O'Finn thought he could identify the speaker. The five ladies—there had been six—were almost indistinguishable by facial features, being all gray-haired, bespectacled, and on the thin, gaunt side. He had all their real names in his notebook, but during his brief investigation he'd come to separate them by their clothes. They seldom changed their costumes. If they'd traded things among them, he'd have been lost. The one who'd just spoken was Miss Green Shawl.

"Reasonably sure," he said. "It was Miss Albertson's niece, as I told you, who requested the investigation. She imagined that her

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aunt had some enemies in this house. But from what I've seen, the bunch of you are living here together with the peace and quiet of a choir of angels."

"But the arsenic, Mr. O'Finn," insisted Miss Necklace of Pearls.

"The deceased took it herself, entirely by mistake," he answered.

"She shouldn't have been rummaging around in my cupboard." The acid remark came from the tallest and gauntest of the starved-looking lot. She was the owner of the establishment, the landlady. Her distinguishing mark was an ever-present Starched Apron.

"Well, for that little boldness," O'Finn said gently, "the poor woman has certainly been punished."

They all seemed to nod, as if in full accord with the punishment. The rules here were pretty strict, O'Finn decided. And from the thin looks of them, the most frequent punishment for any infraction must have been going to bed without supper.

"Well, I'd best be going," he announced.

"Oh, must you, Captain!"

The only one who called him Captain was the one who wore Baby Blue Ribbons in her faded hair, the coquette of the group. She was now waggling her ribbons and pouting.

"Couldn't you stay for tea, Captain?" And then Miss Baby Blue Ribbons, suddenly remembering her proper place, turned humbly to the mistress of the house. "Could we ask him to stay for tea? . . . Please!"

A veritable chorus of Pleases went up, shaking the lacy curtains on the tall, narrow windows. He started to decline, but he was drowned out. The last of them joined in too, the one who wore the Old-Fashioned Bonnet tied securely under her chin, possibly to keep what might have been a wig in place. O'Finn put his faith finally in the usually inhospitable Starched Apron, but she disappointed and surprised him.

"Yes, stay for tea, Mr. O'Finn," she said.

He hemmed and hawed and tugged his ear and tried to think of a bright excuse. "I'm not much for tea," he mumbled.

"Isn't there something a little stronger for Mr. O'Finn?" Miss Green Shawl wondered.

"There might be," the Starched Apron agreed, though somewhat reluctantly.

"I never drink when I'm on duty," O'Finn argued desperately.

"When is that, Captain?"

"Eight to four . . ."

"Well, it'll be four o'clock in a few minutes—by the time the tea's ready."

He recognized when he was beaten, so he took defeat the best he knew how. He accepted the chair they offered him. "There's an extra chair now that Eloise has

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passed on." Miss Starched Apron and Miss Green Shawl went off to the kitchen to prepare the tea and that special something for their guest. O'Finn was left with the other three, wondering for all the world why he had to endure this.

Had he been a less humble man he might have known. But he sat there—for the moment, at least—unaware of the vast charm he exercised over his ladies. Fifty-four on his last birthday and still a bachelor, he was a fine, solid figure of middle-aged but robust masculinity. His great lionlike head, topped by a thick curly thatch which had once been deep red, was now handsomely grayed. His shoulders were as wide as ever, his chest as powerful, and what with keeping fit in the gym, no sign of a paunch surged against his belt line. Except for his plain, rather wrinkled brown suit, he might have been mistaken for one of the great Celtic warriors among his ancestors. Even out of uniform, he was impressive enough, as a member of that modern profession which his race was so fond of. In short, Dennis O'Finn was a magnificent Irish cop.

"How can you be so sure," Miss Baby Blue Ribbons asked him, "that Eloise wasn't murdered?" She spoke the word "murdered" with wide-eyed zest.

"The law of averages, for one thing," he said. "In homicides there are always more accidents than murders." And he regaled them with statistics until the tea tray arrived.

The drink reserved especially for him, he found out then, was a thimble-sized glass of what had once been wine. It had soured, however, from long storage. But O'Finn drank it manfully. The ladies watched with admiration, were even close to applauding when after the first sip, to get the vile stuff done with, he downed the rest of it at one gulp.

The tea was weak and the cupcakes were the smallest anybody had ever dared serve to the likes of O'Finn. But he ate them with the same dainty bites that the ladies used. He ate two, which was exactly his share since there was an even dozen in all.

"Will you come back and tell us if you find out something more about poor Eloise?" Miss Old-Fashioned Bonnet wanted to know.

"Well, I'm not expecting anything else to turn up," he told them. "As far as we're concerned, the case is closed."

And again he sensed a ripple of disappointment going round the circle.

"You mean, we won't see you again, Mr. O'Finn?" Miss Green Shawl asked plaintively.

"Not unless," he said, making a joke, "you leave that rat poison where someone can get hold of it again and take another lethal dose."

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The joke fell flat. He almost thought that they were considering another such fatal mistake to be a possibility. But of course, he reflected, they couldn't possibly be considering that.

"But you could always come to tea anyway," Miss Starched Apron pointed out, with a rare display of generosity. "We're so grateful, Mr. O'Finn, for everything you've done."

"I was just doing my job," he insisted. "And besides, I couldn't be drinking up all your tea."

"We can always manage a cup of tea," the Starched Apron said.

Miss Baby Blue Ribbons giggled. "And if the old lady's too stingy, Captain, I'll buy a pound of tea myself."

The landlady's stern face crimsoned with embarrassment and anger, and she twisted at the apron in her lap. "I'm not stingy," she said in an undertone. "And what would you buy a pound of tea with, I'd like to know?"

"I've got independent means." There was a proud toss of the childish ribbons.

"Be careful of what you tell," Miss Necklace of Pearls put in, "or she'll be raising your board."

O'Finn set down his cup with a clatter that startled them all, and caused the landlady to color again in fear for her china. "I've got to go now," he announced with finality.

Chattering their regrets, they followed him in a bevy to the door. "Will you come back to see us, Mr. O'Finn?" was the general chorus.

"Sure I will," O'Finn promised, but he didn't set a date. He rescued his brown felt hat from the hall table and edged out the door. As he drove away he waved to them as they crowded onto the front verandah.

"And you know," O'Finn said to his partner Ginsberg the following day, "the poor old dears were actually sorry to see me go. They were sorry to see all the folderol come to an end. Homicide investigation—that's a romantic, glamorous thing to most people, I guess. And especially to a bunch of little old ladies who most days would think it exciting to get two cupcakes at tea time instead of one. Now it's back to knitting and tatting for them, and no more talk of murder within their quiet walls."

"They should be glad," Ginsberg suggested, "that your big flat feet won't be tracking mud in any more."

"They should indeed. I felt like a bull in a china shop in that place."

"But probably they were impressed by your great size, O'Finn."

"Ah, they were every one of them old enough to be my mother."

And with that humble estimation of the way things stood, O'Finn dismissed the matter for

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the sake of some real murders—until three and a half weeks later, that is, when word came through of a suspicious death at 909 Sycamore Street.

"That's a familiar address," O'Finn said.

It became more familiar as he drove out alone. The same stately elms on either side of the avenue, and finally the tall old white house, as spindly and angular as its inhabitants, and just as much in need of paint.

"Now what's the trouble here?" O'Finn asked of the uniformed officer and of his listeners in general. But he had a fair idea of what the trouble might be. The ladies were staring at him with solemn fright, but where there had been five of them last time, there were now only four.

"Where is she?" he demanded, meaning the missing one.

He was led into the kitchen, and she was on the floor. He'd been right, was his first thought. The Old-Fashioned Bonnet was a bit askew now, and so was the wig. The salient fact was that the poor lady, if alive, would never have allowed herself to be seen in that condition.

"This one's sure to be a murder," Miss Green Shawl said with barely concealed joy.

"Why do you say that?" O'Finn barked.

"Well, Maud looks just the way Eloise did."

O'Finn asked questions, and got a chorus of agreement on nearly every point. Miss Old-Fashioned Bonnet—her real name had been Maud—hadn't complained of feeling ill, nor had she given any outward signs of illness lately. The ladies had kept to their rooms that morning. But perhaps Maud hadn't. Eloise had been her roommate, but since Eloise's death Maud had had the room alone. It was very likely then that she had sneaked downstairs, without being seen by anyone, and made herself a cup of tea. Such a practice was frowned upon, but Miss Old-Fashioned Bonnet might have broken the rule. The tea was the only possibility. The deceased had not been addicted to any medicines.

"Take that can of tea to the lab," O'Finn instructed. There'd been no autopsy yet to prove a crime, but he didn't want the tea meddled with.

Well, it was when they had gathered later for lunch, the ladies went on, that Maud first showed signs of discomfort. She'd turned pale and sick, had complained of nausea, then of cramps, and finally had collapsed. Yes, their doctor had come, but too late, and he'd left his name for the police.

"Where's the cup she used for that illegal swig of tea?" O'Finn wanted to know.

Since it must have been washed and replaced, nobody could say.

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O'Finn didn't think it really mattered. He went on to things that did matter.

Did Miss Old-Fashioned Bonnet have any enemies in the house? No—at least, no one of her survivors more than any other.

Who left her room and went off alone at any time during the morning? No one. Each of the four had a roommate to vouch for her.

O'Finn left it at that. He set the routine of a murder investigation in motion, had the body carted away, and prepared to leave himself.

"Will you be back, Mr. O'Finn?" he was asked.

"I'll be back," he said grimly.

"Do you still work eight to four, Mr. O'Finn?"

"Monday I go on the night shift. And I wish I'd been on it today. Then I wouldn't have run into this."

A chorus of disagreement answered him. "We wouldn't have anyone but you, Mr. O'Finn . . . Don't you dare put anyone else on the case, Mr. O'Finn . . . You feel free to come back any time in the evening too, Mr. O'Finn . . ."

He ran away from the place rather quickly and impolitely. If murder it had been, he felt, he could think about it much better elsewhere.

Murder it was. The verdict came the next day. There was arsenic in the corpse and arsenic in the can of tea.

"Can you imagine it?" O'Finn remonstrated, talking it out with his partner. "One of those dear little spinsters committing murder!"

"Yes, but which one of them?"

"I don't know. They're as alike as peas in a pod."

"But it must be one. You said you knew of no motive. Which one of them had the opportunity?"

O'Finn consulted his note book. "The lay of the land," he said, "is this. Arsenic was from the rat poison again, and they all knew where that was. And they all knew where the tea was kept. Now . . . they drink tea for supper but not for breakfast. That means the arsenic could have been added any time in the evening or during the night. By which one? Anybody. But the queerest thing of all is this: How did the murdering lady know which other one was going to be drinking tea next?"

"That's a puzzler," Ginsberg agreed.

"It is . . . if you take for granted that she was after Miss Old-Fashioned Bonnet in particular. I've a sneaking hunch though that the murdering lady didn't care who drank tea next. She plops the arsenic in the tea can, saying to herself, first come first served, and let the Devil take the hindmost."

Ginsberg leaped from his chair at that, strode about the room, and then had himself a good laugh. "Well, it's crystal clear to me," he

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said finally, slapping the mighty O'Finn on his broad back.

O'Finn angrily wanted to know what was so clear.

"Let's go back to the first one," Ginsberg explained, enjoying himself. "The one who wasn't murdered at all. You said yourself the ladies were delighted with the whole investigation and were sorry when it ended. They wanted a murder, you see, and you O'Finn, with your brilliant detective work, proved there hadn't been any. Well, now someone has rectified the situation. They've got themselves a murder now. The fact that the murdering lady didn't care who she poisoned proves it. She didn't care who as long as it was murder."

"Rubbish," O'Finn said, but with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"And that isn't all," his partner went on. "The poor dears want a murder for the excitement, yes. But mainly so it will bring the beautiful body of Detective O'Finn back into the house."

O'Finn rose in his wrath, took his partner by the lapels, almost lifting him from the ground, and shook him like a hurricane shaking a palm tree. "You tell that story to anyone in the department," he threatened, "and I'll kill you with these bare hands."

The smaller man wasn't frightened. "They're in love with you, O'Finn," he said. "Every one of 'em. And one of 'em enough to commit murder to enjoy your fine company."

O'Finn relaxed his grip and sat down heavily. He had the look of a troubled man. "I'll resign from the case," he said.

"And what reason will you give the Captain?"

That was the stopper. O'Finn knew it. He got up, crushed his hat on his head, and drove out to Sycamore Street.

This time he interrogated the ladies singly. He was furious, but somehow he maintained an outward show of gentleness. But more and more, as the questioning proceeded, he was faced with the terrible accuracy of Ginsberg's analysis of the situation. Each of his suspects seemed to find his grilling very pleasant, and each was reluctant to have it end. The result, so far as uncovering the murderess was concerned, was exactly zero.

It continued that way. In the department, O'Finn was pressed for a solution. At Sycamore Street, the ladies were in no hurry. O'Finn went on the evening shift, and made after-dark visits to the house. The ladies were even more pleased. But still no progress.

"What's the matter with you?" O'Finn's superior wanted to know. "Are you trying to make a career out of this one case?"

"Can't we put it down as accidental homicide?" O'Finn begged. "It could have been—maybe."

"Two accidents from arsenic in

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the same house a month apart? O'Finn, you're going out of your mind!"

Perhaps he was. He stuck to the case. His pride and his record were now involved. If necessary, he decided, he might even frame one of the ladies. If he could decide which one he hated the most . . .

He got his big idea just about that time.

All right, he said to himself, let's suppose Ginsberg was right. Murder was committed to get him, O'Finn, to Sycamore Street. Well, suppose O'Finn used the strategy of staying away from Sycamore Street. Mightn't one of the ladies, in maidenly desperation, uncover a heretofore hidden "clue"?—or even be willing to break her long silence to get O'Finn back?

He decided it was worth trying.

So he paid them a farewell visit, although he didn't announce it as such. He simply mentioned he was going back to the eight-to-four shift, which disappointed them. But he wanted the call to Homicide, if there was going to be one, to reach him promptly. He was O'Finn on his best behavior. He called them all "darlin' " and said he was sure none of them could have actually killed poor Maud. There'd been an accident or misunderstanding somewhere. He was gay, charming, and gallant—and he left them panting.

But he miscalculated . . .

He stayed away for a full three weeks. And then the telephone call came all right. It was from the Starched Apron. She didn't, however, report a clue or make a confession. She reported that there had been another murder.

The call came at three o'clock. O'Finn might have missed it had it come much later. He drove out at top speed and hurled his huge bulk into the frail little house.

"Who is it this time?" he demanded with a roar.

They took him into the parlor and he saw for himself. It was Miss Green Shawl. She lay where she had fallen, writhing in pain, on the floor. Even so, the shawl was clutched tightly about her dead shoulders.

"I was the one who found her," the Starched Apron volunteered. "It was nearly time for tea, and I was bringing in the tray of cups and things from the kitchen. I was so surprised I dropped it all."

She had indeed and the ladies who knew police routine pretty well by this time, hadn't touched anything. Broken china and spilled sugar lay all over the rug.

"All right," O'Finn said, "you're responsible for the broken dishes. Now who's responsible for this body?"

No one answered. They should have been frightened, O'Finn reasoned. After all, there was a murderess among them who committed another crime as soon as O'Finn seemed to lose interest in the old

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one. And the circle was getting narrower: only three were left—Miss Starched Apron, Miss Necklace of Pearls, and Miss Baby Blue Ribbons.

But they didn't seem frightened. And looking at them, with their adoring faces upturned to his, O'Finn knew why. Their joy at his presence was even stronger than their instinct for self-preservation.

"Is it the tea again?" he asked them.

"I don't think so," said Miss Necklace of Pearls. "We haven't been drinking much tea lately. Except at tea time, of course, and then we all drink it together."

O'Finn phoned for his crew, and then he sat down to think. They were a bit disturbed at being in the same room with the body, but the ladies sat down too. They stared at O'Finn admiringly as he wrinkled his handsome forehead.

He tried to ignore them. He had to think. He couldn't bring back to the department another unsolved arsenic murder of an old lady on Sycamore Street. If it didn't cost him his badge, it would at least cost him all the esteem that thirty years on the force had built up.

Let's use the process of elimination, he told himself. Let's begin, for lack of a better place, with the old Starched Apron herself. She discovered the body. She dropped these dishes and they all broke. Now if that stingy old thing dropped her precious dishes, she must really have been surprised—genuinely surprised. That eliminates her . . .

His mind went elsewhere, but to give his attentive audience something to watch he got down on his knees and began examining the broken china. They were always impressed when he seemed to be searching for physical clues. So he did the job methodically. He even reassembled a broken cup.

"You claimed nothing was touched in this room," he suddenly accused them, and there was a note of triumph in his booming voice.

"Nothing was," Miss Baby Blue Ribbons bubbled.

"Then somebody is lying," he hurled at them.

All three were instantly horrified.

"I've been trying," he explained, "to put together a broken cup. But I can't. Because there aren't any pieces of a handle."

O'Finn waited to let that fact sink in. Miss Baby Blue Ribbons batted her eyelashes at him, Miss Starched Apron looked stern, and Miss Necklace of Pearls seemed in a positive glow of anticipation.

"Oh, what does that mean, Mr. O'Finn?" she cried out. "Please tell us what it means."

Detective O'Finn should be forgiven for indulging in a bit of theatricality at that moment. After all, these dear ladies had endured a lot for his sake. They'd either murdered, been murdered, or stayed

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in this house in constant danger of being murdered—and all for him. So something special was expected of him now—the climax to the show.

"The young lady," he said, and he used the spurious adjective purposely, "who brought these dishes in is a frugal, hard-working soul who for years has managed to support herself by running this boarding house. She has had to learn to save and scrimp and be very careful of her meager possessions. That's why she chose cups without handles. Because she knew *in advance* they were to be broken. Because she knew there'd be a corpse in this room even *before* she entered . . ."

And she got impatient, he added to himself, because she just had to discover the body before four o'clock.

O'Finn had it all wrapped up. The arsenic had been in the buttermilk this time. Miss Green Shawl had taken to buttermilk when they all began to avoid tea. The Starched Apron was safely in custody, and O'Finn was ready to take his last leave of Sycamore Street.

"Won't you come back to see us?" Miss Baby Blue Ribbons asked him mournfully.

By this time O'Finn was more realistic about his own manly attractiveness. He looked at the two ladies, and saw that his answering might well be the doom of one of them.

"I'm being transferred tomorrow," he lied, "to the Arson Squad."

But later he wondered about the wisdom of that "little white" lie. He lay awake all night listening for the sound of Fire Department sirens.

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